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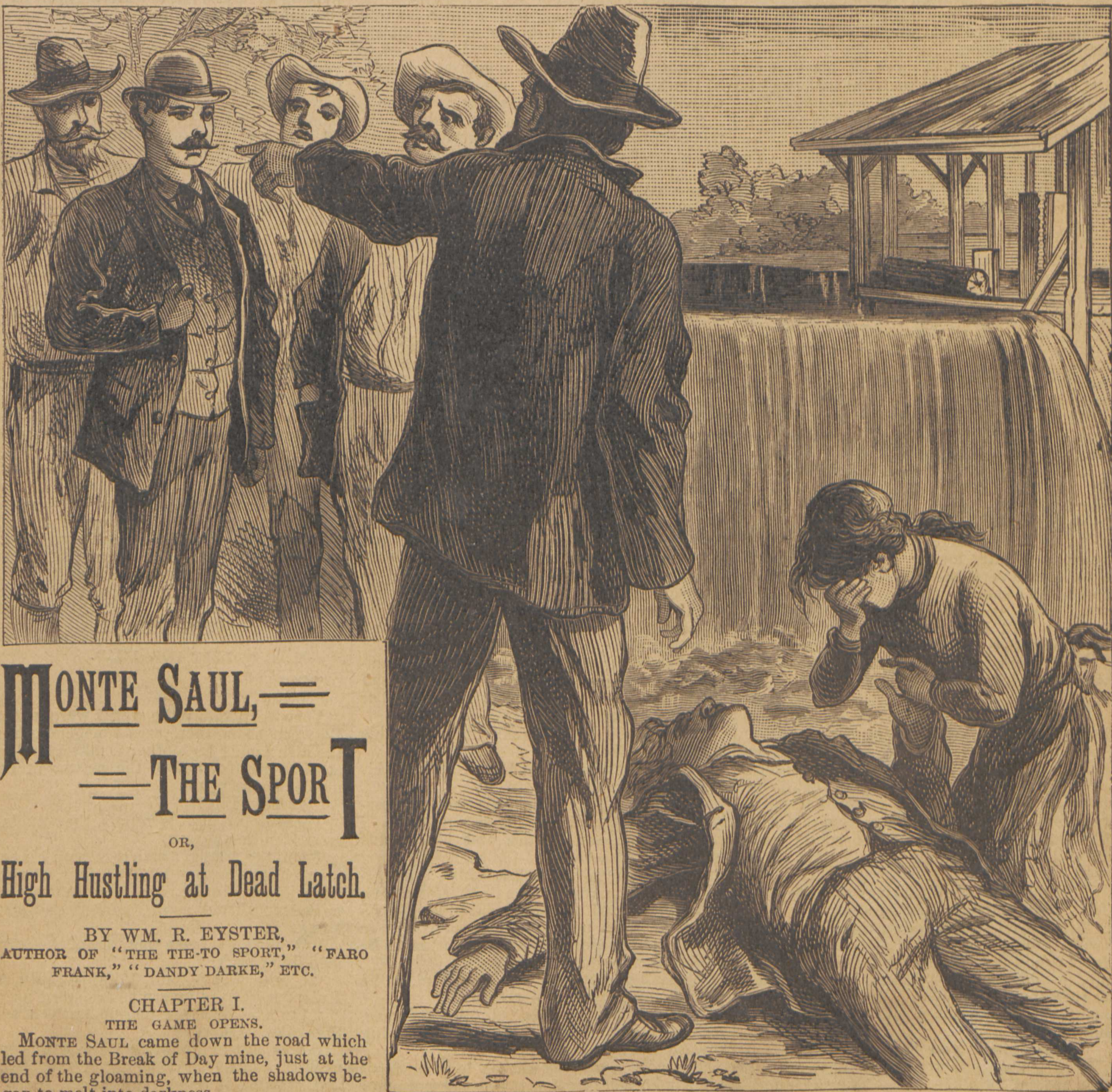
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MONTÉ SAUL,— —THE SPORT

OR,

High Hustling at Dead Latch.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," "DANDY DARKE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GAME OPENS.

MONTÉ SAUL came down the road which
led from the Break of Day mine, just at the
end of the gloaming, when the shadows be-
gan to melt into darkness.

He was as lithe as a leopard, as keen-eyed

"BACK! YOU INFERNAL RASCALS!" EXCLAIMED AMES.

as a cougar, and had the reputation in Dead Latch of caring for neither man nor angels.

He had been tried in the crucible, as it were, and found to be as good as they make them.

It was doubtful if any one man had anything to do with him when it came to drawing for the drop, or playing chief.

Yet, he was not given to brawling for its own sake, and never yet had he fired a shot which the most partial of frontier juries would have been willing to say was in anything but self-defense.

Of course, with such a title, he could hardly be anything else but a gambler, and yet it was a misnomer.

He never played the game of monte at Dead Latch but once, so far as was known, and that was the night he opened a bank, and won the right and title of the Break of Day, after cleaning its proprietor out of all his available cash.

The title was not worth very much then, but afterward, when the work necessary to hold the claim for the next year had been done, its value had been enhanced a hundred fold. There was pay ore in sight, and the chances were the vein would widen as the shaft went deeper.

After that, he spent more of his time on the mine, and less over the card-table, and it was even hinted that he was losing his grip, but they didn't say it when he was around, and when he did sit down at the tables he made the game as interesting as ever. He knew the value of a hand and was not afraid to put up the money to back his judgment. Besides, he always had the luck of the Old Boy.

All this evening his usually clear face had been clouded and he was in something of a brown study as he glided along, making not a sound which might give notice of his approach.

The noise of voices recalled him to himself; and as the voices were in an undertone, as though not intended to be overheard, it was natural enough for him to halt and listen for a moment, if only to locate the speakers.

"How it is to be done is a matter I will look after myself. The old man is in the way and will get out of it."

"And stay out. He's a little hard to get at, but the thing can be worked. How about the little daisy of a daughter? Is she to go in the same boat?"

"Hands off, there!" answered the first voice, in a little louder key than before, as though the very mention of the daughter had given a shock.

"I mean it too. If any harm comes to her there will be music in the air. I'll attend to all that."

"All right, if you will have it so, but I wouldn't mind taking the job of consolation myself."

"Look out that Monte don't get into that before you both," said a third voice.

"I don't know that he is going to go ahead in earnest, but I'll swear I thought I saw him making sheep's eyes in that direction. If you mean sport you better down him first. It will have to come to that anyhow, and the rest of the work would be a good bit plainer sailing with him out of the way."

"That's one of the things we are here for," interrupted the first speaker.

"All Dead Latch knows there is war between him and me, and if anything happens folks would look my way, so it ought to be all fair and above board, and I'll undertake to turn the trick myself. He's not the only man who can handle a shooting-iron, curse him."

"More pluck you than judgment. If that's the way you are beginning to talk I'll look around for a new boss. The shooting is about equal, but he has the luck of the Old Boy."

"Never mind that. I'll play my luck

against his any day in the year. But, come along. Number Four don't appear, and we'll have to do without him for tonight. We can talk the matter over, and have it all cut and dried when he shows up to-morrow night, as he must. After that there must be no more delay."

Monte Saul did not follow as they moved away.

"That's enough," he thought to himself.

"They calculate on attending to me first, and I'll be ready for them when they come. It is hardly worth while troubling Miss Ames; and yet, it might be as well to send her a word of warning. Something might happen to me. That was Clark Bruce, and a couple of his gang—I wonder who the fourth man is?"

Then an idea seemed to strike him, and he gazed keenly in the direction the party had taken.

"I wonder, too, if by any chance they saw me. If they did the chances are they will come back on me mighty sudden."

He heard nothing more of them, however, and finally pursued his way to town with the same noiseless tread, and swung around among the boys after his usual careless style.

Nothing did he see of the man he had called Clark Bruce, and the evening went by without any startling event.

Between Clark Bruce and himself there was something like war, though in the only preliminary skirmish which had yet occurred the advantage had been all on the side of Monte Saul.

Bruce was a man but little older than himself, and apparently built much after the same fashion, though he was an older inhabitant of Dead Latch, and possessed of a larger crowd of personal friends.

He had mining interests not far from the Break of Day, and had a finger in a good many other pies. In fact, he was one of the rich young men of the camp, and being terribly handy with his revolvers, was a bad one to go against.

It was something of a surprise to see him wilt when Monte Saul had him lined; but it was reasoned that the end was not yet, and Saul had been feeling that way himself.

He thought the matter over the day after overhearing the conference of the cabal, but came to no particular conclusion as to what was his best course. Other things finally drove the matter almost out of his mind, and it was only when he was entering the Headquarters Saloon he remembered he was on the peculiar stamping ground of Clark Bruce, and if any scheme was to be carried into effect that night it was not likely to be long deferred.

It was still daylight, but those long summer evenings the crowd gathered soon, and there were a dozen men drinking at the bar when he entered.

"Evening, Curly," he said as he made his way up to the bar.

"Seen anything of Ed Hazen around this evening?"

At the same time he laid his hand carelessly on a decanter which was sitting there in solitary grandeur. Bruce and his friends were at the other end of the bar, altogether.

"Haven't seen him to know him," answered Curly, the bartender, as he twirled a glass along the bar with professional precision.

"If he turns up I'll let him know you're hunting him, and he can tell whether he ought to want to see you."

"That's about right," nodded Saul, as he poured out a moderate potion.

"Don't know that it is," chipped in Bruce, making a step forward, his hand dropping toward his hip.

The movement was almost in advance of his words, and quick as it was the motion of Monte Saul's hand was simultaneous. He had noticed Clark's presence as soon as he crossed the threshold, and after that felt that

if he wasn't ready for him he ought to be shot, anyhow.

"I'm willing to argue the matter with you," coldly responded Saul.

"Don't forget, though, that we are starting fair and even, and whatever line of argument you choose to follow I may get there just a shade the soonest."

"You'll get to a hole in the ground if you undertake to wring yourself in on this party for drinks. I told Curly to set them up for gentlemen, and that bars you out."

"And I notice you're not drinking yourself. Perhaps he didn't sling a tumbler your way—and he did mine. Curly is a blamed good judge of human nature."

"You are a liar and a horse-thief if you want it in strong language; and if that ain't mild enough you are a piker that would eat sand and chaw dirt to wring yourself in on a party of gentlemen for the price of one little drink. I'm saying it; and that you haven't got the nerve to shoot a man when his hands are out and his fingers are empty. See?"

He extended his empty hands, and stood looking at Monte Saul with a sneer on his lips that was harder to be borne than a slap in the face.

"What are you working for, Clark? If you want me to pull trigger it's a clean case of suicide. I'd have you down and dead before any one of your gang could get a hammer back. I've been watching them all. And if it's a big bluff, you ought to know. I'll have a sight for all my wealth if you raise over it by a million. Come off the roof and get down to business. What do you want?"

"I want to give you a chance to make a man of yourself. All Dead Latch knows there is bad blood between us, and the sooner we have it out the better. Name your friend, and follow me. One of us won't come back, and the other will be a chief in town."

It was a regular duel he was proposing, and from what Saul had overheard the night before he was not able to say if it was in good faith or not, but he did not hesitate to take the chances. There was one man there, standing a little apart from the others, and Saul imagined, from what he had seen of him, that he was a man of nerve, and sufficiently honest.

"All right," was his quick response. "Dick Tredgar is good enough for me. I put myself in his hands, and your seconds can arrange with him. Curly, of course, will keep dark till the fun is over."

CHAPTER II.

LEFT FOR DEAD.

"ONE!"

"TWO!"

Very deliberately the words were uttered. Between them there was time enough for the men facing each other to take a final look at earth and sky before the master of ceremonies spoke again.

"Three! Fire!"

There was a double report, the sounds almost blending as one.

Then, the younger man threw up his arms and fell in a heap, while the four, after one keen glance in his direction, to make sure he never stirred again, turned and strode away.

But, as they left the spot, one of the marksmen flung back:

"I said, Monte Saul, I'd shoot you, and I always keep my word to friend or foe."

"I'm a bit of a liar meself, but that takes ther cake. Oh, my!"

It was just in a whisper those words were uttered, as a boy crawled out of the bushes, and, waiting on hands and knees, gazed after the retiring figures.

They were but dimly seen by this time yet the boy crouched low. It was possible

their hearts might soften a little, and they return; or again, his figure might be revealed against the glow in the west, should they happen to give a backward glance.

But no softening of heart or purpose was there in the party. They passed on till the diminishing sound of their foot-falls was lost in the distance, while the body of the fallen man was left to stiffen on the plain.

Then, the boy crept nearer still.

"Ye'r a born liar, Mister Bruce, an' I'll bet yer done it ag'in. He lies mighty still an' quiet, but bet yer ten ter one yer lead didn't touch his heart. I seen ther flash, an' yer bullet went igh."

"That's so, my boy, but for heaven's sake keep cool a minute longer. If they saw you mussing over the remains, they would come back to drive you away. Clark Bruce means me to lie here as food for the wolves, but I'll fool him now, and even up with him hereafter. Curse him, has he gone?"

No need to tell Harry Carter to keep cool. He was always cool. Even when a corpse half turned on its side and spoke to him with a very much-alive voice, it never turned a hair.

"Cool goes, an' you kin take yer time fer comin' ter life ag'in. I've nothin' better ter do, an' ef it makes yer feel good, I kin be watchin' by yer dewy couch ther hull night through."

"I believe you, my boy. You are one in a thousand. I was half afraid you would give a whoop when you heard my voice, and bring the hounds back to see what was the racket. And they had it all set up for me. If they had come, I would either have had to give leg bail, or I would have been a dead man in earnest."

"Kerriect you be. It takes nerve ter listen to a voice from ther tombs."

"And you have it."

"You bet. Ther nerve ov a meat-ax. Oh, my, ain't I?"

The supposed dead man gathered himself up a little and assumed a sitting posture.

The four were gone now beyond danger of recall, and it was time for him to look after himself. He squirmed uneasily, and felt of his left shoulder with his right hand, uttering something which was not a prayer, under his breath.

The boy heard him, and came still closer.

"Nicked yer after all, did he? Let me git a squint at it. I'm jist old blazes at a case ov that kind, an' from ther way ye'r a-twistin', I reckon it's at a place yer can't reach. Blame lucky I happen ter be 'round, for ye'r a-bleedin' a heap-sight free."

While he spoke, he also acted. His fingers were busy around the spot where the wound was supposed to be. He helped the young man draw off his coat, and then applied a bandage with a skill and swiftness that was remarkable.

At first the patient was inclined to give some directions, but he soon saw none were required, for the boy understood his business.

"Really, it was a piece of luck to have you around if it turns out that you can be trusted."

"Trusted? Well, I should inquire, why not? With ary thing an' fur everything. Et don't look, though, ez if it would be strainin' yer gizzard much ter 'stablish a confidence with yours truly. I'll tie yer up, an then you kin go on yer way rejoicin'. Do yer want ter loan me a quarter, er did yer think ov sellin' me a half interest in ther Break ov Day Mine? Ef yer doubt me, don't crowd yerself too hard. I kin still navigate alone."

The youngster was talking for the sake of talk. He had a half formed idea the young man was thinking of refusing his services and was in haste to get done with them, but mean time he desired to divert his thoughts.

"You don't understand me," answered Monte Saul, wincing just a trifle as the lad

drew tighter the knot he was making in the bandage he had applied.

"I would leave Clark Bruce in ignorance of the fact that I am still living, and fear the temptation to tell how for once his aim was not deadly might be too great for you."

"Now, look hyer, Monte Saul. You don't seem ter know me, but I've hed a eye on you fur some time, an' I'm s'prised. It's a bad gang ter buck ag'in, but I didn't think you'd be quite so much afeared ov Clark Bruce. You kin shoot a leetle, yerself."

"As close as Bruce can, when I have the fair show, but to-night it was assassination they meant, and nothing else. The fellow who came out with me was in it as big as any of them. They took our weapons from us, and gave us those guns with only one barrel loaded in each. And the barrel of mine had no bullet in it. If Bruce had missed, some one else was to shoot me down; or if I had closed in on the fellow who fired the craven shot, my second would have been the first to hand him a gun."

The lad uttered a low whisper of surprise. He knew something about the men, and the fracas which led to this duel, and he did not for a moment doubt the word of Monte Saul.

"An' so yer wants a chance ter lay low tell that hole in yer arm gets all right, an' then wade in lemmons fur him. That's right. That's business. I'm dumb ez a clam, an' you play yer game at yer leisure."

"Thanks, my boy. You have it down fine enough to be near center with your shot. When things get straight I'll settle accounts with him or break a wheel trying."

"Bet yer. Now, what yer goin' ter do? Kin I help you ary further?"

"Not at present. I will go over to Honey Dew, and—could I depend on you?"

"Ef it's ary thing ter break up Clark Bruce you kin."

"You seem to know me, but I declare I do not remember ever having set eyes on you before."

"Nothin' sing'lar in that, boss. I ain't a old settler hyer, but it don't take me long in a place ter git things down fine. I got your record long ov ther first, and I bin waitin' a week ter see you an' Clark lock horns. I reckoned it would be t'other way when yer did j'ine; but yer can't most allers sometimes tell what's goin' ter happen. Better luck next time."

"There was nothing of luck about it. I was fool enough to put myself into the hands of a man I thought would be square, even if he was not a particular friend."

"And he sold yer out. Next time you jest shout fur Harry Carter, an' you'll have a pard ter tie to."

"Perhaps; but meantime I want you to undertake a commission for me."

"I'm ther lad fur commishuns. Spread it out, an' I'll take hold ov all four corners."

"I want you to take a note to Miss Ames. You probably know where to find her, and if you don't, it will not be hard to discover where to look without exciting suspicion."

"Know her like a book. Also her dad, Angus Ames, moreoyer. Fork over yer letter an' she'll git it ther fu'st thing after breakfast. Ef thar are ary answer, what's ter be did with it?"

"There will be no answer. If it was not a matter of vital importance, I would not venture to address her. It was largely to prevent the possibility of my speaking that the game of assassination was set up on me. Like a fool, I fell into the trap, but when it was sprung it did not hold, and gave me the name of the fourth man. Wait a minute and I will write the little I have to say. If she is wise, she will take my warning."

"An' if she ain't, an' goes buttin' head-fu'st inter danger, I'll look after her a bit myself, till you git 'round on ther carpet ag'in."

"If you only would. She seems to have

no friend she can trust. And if you could keep an eye on matters you could give me an idea of how the land lays when I get out again for business. I only expect to take a day or so off; but in that time who knows what variations of his scheme may be hatched up by Clark Bruce?"

"Thet's so. An' ef arything mighty important kims up, ez I can't wrastle with meself, I'll come over ter Honey Dew an he'll consultashun."

"All right. That will suit me to a charm, and you may be sure I will make it worth your while to serve me. Just now, Monte Saul may be below par in public estimation at Dead Latch; but the time will come soon when it can judge between him and Bruce, and I have no fears of which will get the decision. Here is your letter. Of course, if you should be asked any questions by outsiders, you know nothing about Monte Saul, or his whereabouts."

As well as he could the young man had been scribbling with a pencil on a few blank leaves of a memorandum-book.

It was a one-handed sort of work, for his left arm was in a sling, and the hand which protruded could furnish little assistance. The writing was almost a scrawl, but he took pains to render it as legible as possible.

Carefully he turned one corner over and over, so as to keep the leaves together, and then handed the writing to the boy, who took it, gave a nod and a word of adieu, and then started at a jog trot for the town of Dead Latch, which lay something less than a mile away.

CHAPTER III.

THE WARNING.

THE conversation with Monte Saul had occupied some time, and it was not likely the boy would overtake Clark Bruce and his friends.

So he thought, at least, and he swung along the trail with a steady, careless step, thinking over what he had just seen and heard.

"By jinks, it war ther purtiest trap I ever heared on, an' Monte waltzed right inter it. They give him a fair show—ter own six foot by two in a grave yard—an' left it ter charity ter do ther plantin'. I wouldn't allowed thet Clark Bruce would 'a' done sich a trick, though. He might 'a' knowed it would be mighty lonesome fur the corpse, all by itself, out thar on the prairie. An' kiotes around, too thick ter shake 'a' stick at. Guess he tho'rt they'd save ther expense ov a funeral."

He had not got to the latter end of the train of thought which had been started. It had not yet struck him that, as there seemed to be a woman in the case, nothing connected with it could be strange.

And he was destined not to reach that conclusion for the present.

From the direction of the town a confused sound of voices told him a party of men were approaching in haste, and that they felt there was no necessity to conceal their coming.

Harry was on the look-out at once.

"That's a wrinkle above me, by jinks! He's gone fur a corryner's jury, an' are a-bringin' 'em ter view ther corpus whar it fell. Didn't da'st ter touch it tell ther law allowed. Guess I'll see what ther court looks like afore I lays in fur a job ez a witness. When I know who's jedge I'll know ef it's good fur me 'hulsome ter stand in ther box."

He had left the trail the moment the first sound reached his ears, and at a little distance threw himself on the ground.

The straggling procession went by, and the boy retained his position. The foremost man in the lot was one of those who had stood by Clark Bruce, and Harry did not think it was altogether advisable to be seen of him.

For that matter, he decided that if he made his appearance it might be suspected he knew something of the matter, and he would be open to questions as to the disappearance, concerning which he chuckled to himself as he thought:

"Won't that fun'ral come to a sudden stop? An' ef Monte Saul kin hide his trail ez well ez I reckon, thar will be wonderin', an' consider'ble doubtin', done afore they git back ter Dead Latch ag'in."

To make sure he would not meet a second section of curious ones when he arose, the boy made something of a *detour*, and so found his way to the town without further interruption.

By and by the searchers came back in no very good-humor.

Clark Bruce was not with them, nor was he to be seen at his usual haunts.

If he had been he might have heard various remarks which would not have seemed complimentary.

"It was all very well for him to shoot Monte Saul after an orthodox fashion—if he was able—but to say that he had done it and then leave, or produce, no actual proofs, was too much like a game at the expense of their credulity, and a good part of the town was ready to kick.

What made the matter worse was, every man felt that he had been defrauded when he was not invited to the show. Such a meeting ought to have been public property, and to think it had been carried through without a man being the wiser made them ready to curse Clark Bruce, Curly, or any one else who might have published a hint and had not.

"Clark knows enough ter git in when it rains," thought Harry, with a shrug of his shoulders as he listened to various comments.

"Ther question are, whar are he gone to? Mebbe it might be ez well ter find out. I don't reckon he could keep outer mischief ef he tried, an' ef I kin locate him I kin see what's goin' on."

That was easier thought than done. Clark was not at the hotel where he boarded, though some one said he had been seen entering the door. Harry climbed up to the window of his room, at some risk to his neck, and made sure that there was no one within.

"Blazes! He can't hev gone back an' got on ther trail ov Monte. I never thought ter give Saul me popper, an' I might 'a' knowed he'd need it wuss ner I would. Ef Clark mounts him, an' he not heeled, he'll make an end ov him this time, sure."

He was a little puzzled how to act.

A horse was beyond him, unless he was willing to risk his neck. He knew the danger when it came to an unlicensed appropriation of horse-flesh, and that an irate owner would be willing to hang even a small boy without giving him a chance to explain.

"What's ther matter with tryin' ter see Miss Ames right off ther handle, 'thout waitin' till mornin'? Then I kin lope right off ter Honey Dew, an' ef my man's thar I kin post him how ther land lays, and how public 'pinion are a-runnin'. Ef he was hyer, now, he'd be jaybird, sure."

It was not so late in the evening that the idea of seeing Ethel Ames was altogether hopeless, and he put it into action at once. Angus Ames lived just fairly beyond what was considered the limits of the town, and it would not take long to reach the place. He set off at a jog trot until he reached the bank of the river.

Angus Ames was a man of some importance in Dead Latch, though he did not mingle much, socially, with its inhabitants. He lived in a cottage on the other side of the river, and owned the only mill in all that region.

Half a mile back of the mill his choppers

found the timber to keep them busy, and what lumber did not go to the rival camp of Honey Dew was easily wagoned across the ford. The location was convenient for both the towns, and the trade in either direction was about equal.

That he was making money no one thought of denying, but there was a great difference of opinion about the man himself. He kept to himself out of business hours, and the sports of Dead Latch had waited in vain to see him turn up at their popular resorts.

As they could not understand how a man with means at his command should care to lead the life of a hermit, there was a good many who looked upon him with an eye of suspicion, and were ready at any time to hear that a sheriff from over the mountains had arrived in pursuit of the mill-owner.

Others, however, gave the credit of his reticence to his daughter. From what little they had seen of her they were willing to admit that almost any man would stay at home with such good company.

Miss Ethel was a beauty, there was no denying that; and the general opinion was, she was as good as she was handsome.

For once, general opinion was not far wrong.

She was not a frequent visitor of the town, but was occasionally seen in the stores; and there were two or three young citizens who had found opportunity to speak with her quite outside of the line of business, though Dead Latch knew nothing about it.

Arrived at the ford Harry could see a light twinkling in the distance, which he knew came from one of the windows of Angus Ames's cottage.

"Good boy! Thar's some one afoot around ther house yit. Ef it's Miss Ethel I kin git through with ther business in A Number One style. Ef it ain't, I'll see thet no harm's done. I only wisht I hedn't bin so blame honest. I'd give a nickel right now ter know what's in this hyer note, an' I never thought ter look while I hed ther chance."

"But, no. Dog-gone it, I won't look, ef I bu'st meself in ignorance. I'll trust ter luck, an' mebbe Sport Saul 'll tell me."

He rolled up the bottoms of his pants, waded the river where it was shallowest, and took up his line of march to the house at a lively pace.

As he drew near he saw the light begin to move about from one place to another. He was just in time.

"Somebody's 'round shettin' up afore goin' ter bed, an' most likely it's ther old man. Wisht I knowed what his idears are 'bout shootin' small boys ez come prowlin' 'round after ther sun goes down, 'thout inquirin' fu'st ef they are in good an' regular standin' in ther Baptis' church. Onder sich circumstances I've knowed a keerless man ter ketch a deacon in ther draw—but he war black, an' a hen-roost most amazin' near."

He gave a sigh over the depravity of mankind in general, and stole along more softly than ever. The some one had come out on the covered porch in front of the house, and stood looking down the road.

The some one happened to be Miss Ethel herself. She gave a start as a little figure popped up not a dozen yards from her, and a voice, which evidently belonged to a youngster, inquired in a low tone:

"Evenin', miss. Are ther old man ter home?"

"Who are you, boy? and what do you want with my father?"

"That ain't answerin' my conundrum, but I'm willin' ter go yer so fur ez ter say thet I'm a young man frum ther city, bringin' a letter marked private an' confidential. Likewise, in haste, moreover."

"I am sorry, then, since my father is not here. He went over to Honey Dew this morning, and has not yet returned. He ex-

pected to pass through Dead Latch on his way back. He may be there now."

The appearance of the boy had startled her, but his voice and manner reassured her almost as soon, and she spoke in a quiet tone; and without much curiosity. Letters had been delivered by special messenger from the town before this.

"That's all right, fur ther letter ain't fur him. I war afear'd he might be a-interceptin' it an' so war feelin' about ter see ef he war around. Hyer you be, ez you kin see. Freeze onto it an' it'll do yer good."

He advanced a few steps, holding out the letter as he came, and Miss Ethel had accepted it before she knew what she was doing.

Then, it was too late to temporize. The boy gave a nod and a spring. Before she had made up her mind to call him back he was almost out of sight in the shadows.

"What does it all mean?" she thought to herself.

"Is it a letter from some almost forgotten friend in the East, forwarded in this way by Glenn, the postmaster; or, could it be—?"

She stopped short. So far, no one at Dead Latch had ever attempted to open a correspondence, but she was woman enough to know such a thing might be on the carpet. She turned and went into the house. She would know what it was, and then could decide whether to read it to the end.

The scrawl was short, and none too easy to read.

MISS AMES:—I have reason to believe your father is in some danger, and would beg you to warn him to be on his guard at all points. You may not be altogether safe yourself. If the worst comes to the worst, remember you have a friend who will reach you in danger, even if he comes a little late.

"A FRIEND."

And in one corner of the missive she noted a little splotch of blood, freshly dried.

While she pondered over the warning, she heard in the distance the dull report of firearms, and after a minute, when she leaned out of the window, all was still.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIGHT AT THE FORD.

So far Harry Carter's mission seemed to him to be a success.

He had delivered the missive, and if he knew anything about such things he had aroused Ethel's curiosity. There was little doubt in his mind she would read the letter without waiting for the return of her father; which was what was wanted.

Afterward, she might do as she chose. The principal point had been gained, and the boy felt himself free to look around after Monte Saul, though the danger to that individual did not seem as great as it did a while before.

He hustled along at a lively rate till he came to the ford at the river.

There he halted a moment and listened.

He could hear the birds of the night, the ripple of the water as it swept past him; and in the distance the roar of the dam. It seemed, too, as though there were other sounds. Horsemen were abroad in the darkness, and they were coming toward him.

"P'rhaps that's ther old man now. Mebbe it's some 'un else. Best continner ter go slow."

As he had done once before that night, he slid off to one side, though this time he selected a post of advantage, where the rising ground enabled him to look down upon, and command the trail.

The horsemen came adily on at a cautious gait, until they had entered the ford.

Here they naturally stopped while their animals drank, and the low spoken conver-

sation came quite distinctly to the ears of the boy.

"Here's as good a spot as any. We can halt him just as he comes out of the drink. He can't get past us very well, and if he turns back one of you can plug him as he comes. Jimmy can stay on this side and look out for breakers."

"Sure, an' av Oi kin do that whin he's comin' back whoy can't Oi do it whin he's goin', an' save all the thruble?"

"Because, if he don't cut up rusty we may not have to do any shooting at all. You work to orders, Jimmy, and ask no questions. You'll live longer, and draw a blamed sight more pay. Fall back, now, and the rest of you follow me."

The horses came splashing out of the river, and were drawn up a few yards from the road. They were effectually screened from the view of any one making the ford, and were as quiet, well-behaved a set of horses as Harry Carter ever saw. They did not even try to give notice of his presence by the snort which ordinary, every-day sort of horses would have done.

The dispositions were just in time, too. Hardly had they been completed when the clatter of hoofs was heard in the direction of Dead Latch, and some one approached the ford at headlong pace.

"Silence, all! Not a whisper," was the low order of the leader, while Harry Carter listened eagerly.

Down into the ford came the horseman, and his horse stopped just as the others had done.

The animal drank greedily, as though it had been warmed by a long and hard ride. Had there been the slightest sound from the bank the man had the best of opportunities to hear it.

But the men in ambush were silently biding their time, and the boy behind them was as quiet as any of them.

"Come up, Jack!" finally exclaimed the solitary horseman, becoming impatient.

"It's just like you to want to drink the river dry. You can have another try at a gorge when you get me home. At present I am in too much of a hurry."

The grumble was finished as the animal emerged from the water and began the ascent of the shelving bank, and as his words ceased another voice took up the strain, in a somewhat different key.

"Hands up, Angus Ames, and don't you make any mistake about the doing of it. If a bushel of buckshot comes your way some of them will hit you, sure."

Half a dozen sharp clicks followed, the sounds rising with terrible distinctness on the midnight air.

"Hands up, I say!" continued the leader of the foes in ambush.

"And don't you forget we have you right where we can see every move, and if they don't come up empty, good-by, John! We can find just as much coin in the pockets of a dead man as in those of a live one."

It was true enough, that the moon shone brightly through the break made in the fringe of trees by the trall; while the speaker was invisible in the shadow.

Angus Ames could understand that if a couple of double-barreled shot-guns were turned loose in his direction it would be strange if some of their contents did not find him.

But at the same time, there was something reassuring in the very threat. Robbery was apparently the end in view, and there was a tacit promise that if he submitted quietly, he was in no great danger. Had murder been meant, they would have shot him down without any of this parley.

"Sorry for you, boys," he said, in a voice which showed little, if any agitation.

"If I had known you were coming out to meet me, I might have tried to have my pockets better lined. It won't exactly be a

water haul, but with the exception of a few papers and documents of no particular value to any one but their owner, I have very little about me. Perhaps a hundred dollars will cover the amount. Better luck next time—for one side or the other."

He gave a little, short laugh as he spoke, and raised his hands above his head with a careless ease that seemed to say, he did not care much whether school kept or not.

"Never you mind whether the haul is worth the fishing for or not. Just shell out. Maybe we can judge better than you whether those same papers have any value or not."

"Shell it is, but I wish you would be a little more explicit. If I am to turn my pockets inside out for your inspection, I can't very well keep on holding my hands over my head. I'll hand over first what I can find, and if you don't think I have done the square thing, then you can look for more."

One of his hands dropped naturally and carelessly to his breast pocket, as if in search for his wallet, and keener eyes, even, than those which were fixed upon him might have been deceived by the movement and words.

But, an instant later, the careless ease was gone. The hand which dove into that breast-pocket came out armed with a revolver, and at the same time Ames drove his spurs into the flanks of the already fretting steed.

Ames was nothing more than an average marksman, but he had located the sound of the voice pretty accurately, and never hesitated to send a bullet straight in that direction; and he was cool enough to note that at the report there was an answering one from a spot considerably in the rear of his challenger.

At the same time some one shouted:

"Sock it to 'em, Pard Ames. We got 'em in a box, an' ef they don't git a leg over ther edge, we'll shut down ther lid, sure."

The interruption was as startling to the ambuscaders, as it was unexpected, and as the first shot was followed by others, and the bullets came hurtling in among them with a closeness more dangerous with each report, attention was called in that direction, while with a great bound Jack took his master well past the ambush.

Ames turned in his saddle as he flitted by, and sent a shot or two across to where he hoped the most good would be done, but he was far too cool and careful to entirely empty his weapon in such chance firing.

He could not tell what dangers he might come face to face with when he had gone further, and so saved a bullet or two for another emergency. At present, he knew he was tearing along the road to his home, with nothing in front of him, and did not believe there was anything could stop him unless his horse was first shot.

The boy in the bushes knew all that, too; and something more.

It was not likely there were two gangs lying in wait for the mill-owner that night, and bar an accident the escape of Angus Ames was a certainty.

The next thing for him to do was to look out for number one. It would not do to lurk there any longer, since it would not take long for the men to discover they had but a single antagonist to deal with.

After that, a resolute charge, or, perhaps, a stray bullet, might do the rest. He started to steal away, reloading his revolver as he went.

It was fortunate for him he knew the river as well as he did, or he might have got an ugly fall at the steep bank, down which he slid so lightly. Below the ford the water deepened, and Carter took to it like a spaniel. Noiselessly he swam out into the stream, and then floated away on his back, with nothing but his nose above the surface. He was getting a very complete ducking, but at the same time was eluding the

search which was being so greedily made on shore.

In safety he crossed the stream, and finally drew his dripping figure up the shadow-hid bank on the other side. He would have dearly loved to have a closer view again, but was too wise to venture near the marauders. Without waiting to watch them further he started for Dead Latch.

CHAPTER V.

HOLD UP CHARLEY MAKES A CAPTURE.

ETHEL AMES was leaning out of the window, listening with breathless earnestness, when her father came clattering up to the house, and she gave a glad little cry as she recognized the horseman.

"What was it?" she exclaimed, opening the door which she had taken the precaution to lock, and stepping out upon the porch.

"Something has happened, for I heard shots down about the ford, and if there had not been trouble you never would have pressed Jack so hard when so near home."

"It is all right, little girl. Nobody has been hurt, unless they deserved it, and I think the racket is over for the night."

He slipped off his horse, opened the knots of the cinches, drew off the bridle, and turned Jack loose to graze.

The animal would come to him at a whistle, and there was little danger he would wander beyond hearing.

Nevertheless, when they entered the house together, Angus Ames carefully locked and bolted the door after them, and led the way to the room he called his study.

There was an assortment of weapons there, and he wanted to be where he could have them ready to his hand. It was possible, if not likely, there would be pursuit, and with plenty of ammunition he would hardly object to a little long range practice.

Ethel was not of the die-away order, and Angus Ames knew it. He told her without hesitation, of the the attack at the ford, and that some person, to him unknown, had executed a diversion which had perhaps saved his life.

"Did you notice anything peculiar about his voice?" asked Ethel.

"I did, and that is what has been puzzling me. It seemed to be disguised, for it was shrill and piping. Probably it was some one known either to them or me, and he wished to conceal his identity. Whatever may have been his object he seemed to accomplish it. Perhaps I should not have deserted him altogether, but I believed then, and I believe now, his intention was that I should ride on. After I was once past the toils I heard no more of him or his gun. He must have retreated in good order. Had he been harmed or captured I would have heard of it."

"Then there is something in the warning, after all. Can it be possible the boy himself is the friend who wrote the note? Hardly, though he seems to have come in the hour of danger, and come a little late. He just fairly had time to reach the ford. It must have been he."

She spoke more to herself than to her father, and there was a little frown of thought on her brow as she considered the question she had raised.

"I do not understand, but something must have happened, of course. To whom do you refer?"

For answer to the question of her father Ethel put the note she had received into his hand, and watched him carefully while he read it.

"Strange, this. My secrets seem to be known to more than one; and for once it may be as well to lay some stress upon an anonymous letter. I was certainly in some danger, and if things are as you say the boy bearer of this probably came to my rescue. Oh,

well. A mouse may help a lion when the conditions are right, and I won't blush to own up. What sort of a fellow was he, large or small, well dressed or disreputable, honest or a rogue, judging from appearances?"

As accurately as she could Ethel described the appearance of Harry Carter, and struck pretty nearly an average between the extremes of the different sections of her father's question.

Ames shook his head.

He had never noticed such a boy in Dead Latch, nor could he imagine who he might be. It was a mystery he would have to unravel at some future time. Certain he was, there had already been proof the warning was worth taking. If the boy was only an agent he knew how to work for the interest of his principal, and some day Angus Ames intended to thank him, if he did not reward him more substantially.

"The strangest thing is, how they came to know I had papers of any value, or that they should desire to capture them. Perhaps they wanted to make me pay for them twice over. If not, to what use could they put them? The boy may know something about it, or could put me in communication with his principal. I think it would be well to place the documents in a safe spot, and then go see if I can find any traces of him. Had I known it was only a boy I would not have abandoned him to his own resources. The more I think of it the more cruel it seems."

Ethel offered no objection, though she did not believe the effort would result in any thing worth the trouble.

As to danger, the hawks had made their swoop, and were probably far enough away by this time.

When she suggested he should waken John, a trustworthy man of all work, who slept in the cottage, Mr. Ames said he preferred to leave him where she could have him in case any supposed need should arise.

He threw a Winchester over his arm, saw that his revolver was handy, and quietly set out for the ford.

It was a late start, but it was better made late than never. Harry had made a temporary escape, but he was not altogether done with the highwaymen who would have halted Angus Ames.

There was a fellow who had been called Jimmy by the leader, and who had been stationed on the other side of the river to prevent a possible retreat.

After the sharp reproof he had received, he determined to follow his instructions to the letter, and so, though he heard the hitch in the proceedings, patiently awaited the result, very well satisfied that if business did not come to him, on his side of the river, he wouldn't hunt for it on the other.

Of course he heard the shouting and the shooting, but he listened to it perfectly unmoved, and heard Angus Ames dash away, with a chuckle of satisfaction.

A little later he thought he understood matters, when he caught a glimpse of Harry, just after he had taken to the water.

"It's there yez are, are yez? Sure, an' ye'll hev to d'ale wid Jimmy O'Brien now, av yez comes moi way. It's too schmall a mark be the moonlight, but av yez lands on this side the crake, it's moi mutton yez are." He crept along quietly, keeping as good a watch on the river as he could, and trying to make out where the person in the water intended to land.

It was not easy work he had set himself to do, and after the first sight, had he not known the boy was there, he would not have been able to locate him at all.

Even then, he made some little mistake in his calculations as to where Harry would land, and the boy had drawn himself out of the water, and started on a trot for Dead Latch before he fairly realized it.

Unfortunately for Harry Carter, he struck

toward the trail at once, and that brought him nearer to O'Brien, who silently started at an angle, with the intention of intercepting him. Harry had forgotten all about the man left on that side the river, and the first intimation he had of his danger was when a hand suddenly grasped him from behind.

Harry was sharp, and shrewd, and strong for his age, but he was no match for a full grown man who had him at a disadvantage. Before he could swing his pistol hand around he was on his back, and a heavy knee boring into his chest.

"Arrah, ye little spalpeen, Oi have yez, an' I'll kape yez safe tell the captain comes. We'll see phat he has to say about yez."

Harry gave a futile squirm or two, and then lay still, while the Irishman gave a low, thrilling whistle, by way of signal.

"You've got him?" shouted a voice from the other side of the stream.

"Oi have some wan. Av yez 'wants him, say so, an' av yez don't Oi'll lit him go."

"Hold on to him, then, and we'll be with you in a minute. It's the hound that spoiled the fun, and we can play to get even with him, anyhow."

Jimmy had pretty well taken in the nature of his capture, and was rather ashamed of it, but it was too late to turn him loose. He twisted him to his feet, and brought his wrists behind his back, where he held them with one hand, while he urged him on.

By the time the leader and his men had crossed the river, Jimmy and his captive had reached the trail.

"Sure, an' it's ownly a shmall b'ye," said Jimmy, apologetically, "but Oi thought az he wor thryin' to git away, Oi had betther take him in."

"Right you are. Small boy or not he did the mischief, and he'll do more if we don't put him where the dogs won't bite. If you had rung his infernal little neck first off it would have pleased me all the better."

"Sure, an' it's not too late to do it now," was the cool response, as Jimmy shifted his fingers from wrists to neck.

Harry shivered in spite of himself.

He had lived among this sort of men long enough to know that when they talked that way it was more likely to be earnest than jest, and that if Jimmy was what he seemed, a boy more or less on his conscience would not trouble him much. He was not certain what they suspected, or how much they thought he knew, but he believed he had seen Jimmy before, and unless the Irishman was utterly reckless, and altogether given over to this sort of business, Harry was in an ugly position. On the face of the matter, he knew altogether too much.

Besides that, there was no question but what he had fired a number of shots at the road-agents and some of them might have come uncomfortably close.

He said nothing for the present. It was just as well to try and find out which line would be the best to follow.

"Hold on a trifle," said the captain; and then turning to the boy he continued:

"Where do you come from, and what are you doing here this time of night?"

"I come frum ther river, last; an' ef you got two good eyes in the head of you you kin see that I'm a-shiverin'. Better let me run along now er I might ketch cold."

"You'll ketch cold enough to make you stiff as a wedge if you try any of your cheek here. Do you belong up at the house of Ames?"

"Not regular like, but ez fur ez a meal ov cold wi'ttals now an' then, er s'uthin' ov that sort, you might count me in."

"How many men are there about the house at night, and what sort are they? See if you can tell a straight story."

"Three men not countin' a boy when I'm there. All ov us heeled, an' mighty desp'rit fighters. Be you goin' ter call on us now, er wait tell you git a bigger gang?"

Don't make a diffabitterence. You'll always find the old man wide awake, an' his guns ready fur biz."

"You infernal little liar! There's only one man on the place besides Ames, and he's better suited to wear petticoats than the handsome daughter. Chuck him in the river, Jimmy, and leave him there. He may as well be drowned as hanged; and that last is what he's aiming for."

"Come along wid yez. Ye know too much to live, an' av ye dhrowns this noight yer own mother won't be sorry."

Never once did the Irishman relax his grip as he dragged the boy away, and before Harry made out what was really intended he was flung far out into the water, to the accompaniment of a laugh from the outlaws in the distance.

What was to come next was the important question, for there were two senses to be taken out of the order. Jimmy seemed bent on assuring him as to what he intended.

"Sure, an' I wor to l'ave yez thar. There's ownly wan way av doin' it, phor yer shwims loike a doock. Howld stiddy a blessid minnit tell Oi can get a b'ade on yez, an' ye'll bob down sayrene."

He drew his revolver as he spoke, cocked it, and aimed toward the little tow head, which bobbed out of sight on the instant.

On the night air his words carried far, and were heard, not only by the captain, but by some one else. As he stood there in the moonlight he was not a bad mark, and he heard the sudden report of a Winchester, and the angry hist of a bullet, whizzing within an inch of his head.

"Howly Moses!" he exclaimed, springing backward into the shade, while the boy kept on swimming gamely for the middle of the stream.

CHAPTER VI.

CLARK BRUCE IS DISAPPOINTED.

CLARK BRUCE thought it might be as well to keep out of the way of the men of Dead Latch for the present.

Monte Saul was not an especial favorite, nor did he have many enemies among the inhabitants, and as far as a *melee* could be, it would appear to have been done all fair and square, according to the code.

Still, there were several weak spots which might come to light, and until he was certain what view would be taken of them it would be just as well to play modest and keep out of sight.

He had other reasons, also, which will be developed at the proper time. If Dead Latch took a notion to make a hero of him, and started for a red-fire celebration it would not be so easy to get away when the hour came.

Ostensibly he retired to his own quarters, but, as Harry Carter discovered, he did not remain there long.

He wanted to know what the deputation to the battle-ground found, and to be sure that his bullet had gone just where he thought it did. Without being seen of any one he made his way out of the house by the rear entrance, and got around to the little cabin occupied by Dick Tredgar, the treacherous second of Monte Saul.

"What in blazes did you come here for?" growled Dick, as Bruce silently entered on finding the door was not locked.

"It's like enough some of Monte's friends will be asking whether my man had a fair shake, and why the thunder I didn't stay by him, even if he was dead. You're sure he is, by the way? When I saw him drop I took it for granted your lead had gone where you said it should, but I begin to think I ought to have made sure."

"You'll find the ball right through the center of his heart—if he had such an organ, and it was in its right place. I took my time to it, for you must have seen Monte fired a

shade the soonest. If a paper wad carried as far as a lead ball, and as true, I would have had it right through the bridge of the nose."

"Ugh! Don't speak about that. I don't care to hear anything about the work of the doctor. I saw the pistols loaded, and it's all I want to know. They will be bringing him in soon, and I suppose I ought to go out as one of the chief mourners, but I swear I'd about as soon go to my own funeral."

"And that's right where you will go to if you don't dry up on that nonsense. You know if I turn my hand thumbs down you flicker out in the draft I can set to blowing. I'm not standing any of that nonsense, and it's the last warning."

"That's all right. I guess you'd sooner I said my little say-so to you than any one else, and if I can't have a chance to let a bit of steam off there may be a regular blow-up. A fellow has got to die once anyhow, and when he gets as far as I have on the wrong track here I'm not sure but what it would be as well to start fresh, and see if he can't do better the next time."

There was an air of gloomy desperation about Dick Tredgar which did not altogether please his seeming master.

"If there was any use to reason with you I would say you are on the down-grade now, going pretty fast, and if you got a sudden flip you'd go down all the faster. You want to let well enough alone, for if I start in you'll go by lightning Express, and find it a mighty long time of waiting before you get to the top of the hill again. Hands on the board, now. Are you really going to kick or not? and it's the only time of asking."

"You know you have me foul. I may grumble; but it's not likely I really mean to kick. After all, who wants to be hung? What are your lordship's orders?"

The sharp warning of Clark Bruce had taken immediate effect, and it was with an air of thorough recklessness Dick Tredgar answered.

"That shows you know how to level your head again when it gets off of plumb. I want to know how they found him, and what they did with him. Some of the boys had the office to bury him right there; but there may be some fools who will insist on bringing him into town with a whoop. You can't always tell. If they do it may make some trouble."

"You might have put the job on some of the other boys, but I'll do the best I can. I'm not asking any questions myself, if I can get out of it, but Hicksey can do it for me."

"Fix it to suit yourself, but don't put it off too long. I want to know how things stand as soon as possible."

Tredgar went out without further delay, but as he went he grumbled to himself:

"Curse him, he wants to show his authority. He had better not crack his whip too loud. He has the cinch knotted mighty tight, but what good will that do him if he's not there to ride?"

A noise in the distance showed there were some arrivals, and Clark Bruce did not have long to wait for intelligence.

Before long Tredgar came bursting in.

"There was a hitch in the programme somewhere!" he exclaimed.

"You better go out and explain to the gang. For a man who was shot through the heart Monte Saul turned out a lively sort of a stiff. He's skipped."

"Skipped!"

"Lit out. Got up and dusted. He was nowhere to be found, and some of the boys say it was all a fake, and that he never was there at all."

"What sort of eyes did they have, then? With a moon like that"—he jerked his hand toward the window, through which the clear light was streaming—"they ought to be able

to lift the trail without spectacles. Some one has carried him away."

"Some of them thought they saw some sign, but the rest don't know whether to laugh or get mad at the rise they say has been taken out of Dead Latch. Let them think so if they want to. It will make it all the smoother sailing for us. Maybe he will never turn up again."

"If he's alive you'll see him to your sorrow. If he's dead there is a chance he will be planted, and no more said about it. See that you don't chatter too free, and I'll look after things myself."

Without any air of caution, yet, without being seen, Clark Bruce left the town alone, and retraced his steps to the place of the duel.

He found easily enough the exact spot where he had been standing when he pulled trigger, and after that it was not hard to locate Monte Saul's position.

He paced across as methodically as Dick Tredgar had done when he was helping to place the men; and then bent over and narrowly examined the ground.

"The fools!" he muttered.

"Their eyesight must have been as poor as their intentions. There is blood on the grass; how much of it did they expect to see? A drop would be enough, for he might have bled inwardly. Now, to strike the trail of the man or men who carried him away."

Bruce professed to be something of a trailer, and he had followed the craft in places where his life depended upon it, but it struck him he had come across some one who was as wily as a red Indian.

It was almost by chance he found signs which let him a little into the true history of the case.

"They have run all over the trail, curse them, and I'll have to make a bigger cast about to find it, but it looks as though he might have been sitting here a bit while some one tied him up. Those little footprints showed their owner stayed too long in one place to be only looking around for a body that was missing. It's a boy, sure enough, and he knows more than the rest. If I had the time I would follow him in and choke the truth out of him. Wonder if it was the same kid I saw about the headquarters, early in the evening? If I saw his face again, I would know it. He has struck back for town, and I wonder what sort of a yarn he will tell. A boy can be mighty dangerous when he's not trying."

He scowled as he muttered, and then, with an angry gaze in the direction of the town, he turned away, and began to circle around the spot. In spite of the sign which he read so truly, he could not believe his aim had failed him, or that Monte Saul still lived.

"No use," he said, at last.

"If he had been carried away there would have been something to show the fact. And if he has gone away on his own feet, he is a better man, and a gamer man, than I gave him credit for. It would be like him to drag himself over to Honey Dew—if he could—to refit, but I've no time to follow the road to make sure. He couldn't keep this up forever, but I'll have to let him go for the present."

He was consulting his watch, by the moonlight, and the hands showed the hour was even later than he supposed. Without delay he left the trail, and strode away at right angles to it.

Half an hour of vigorous walking brought him to the spot which he had evidently been aiming to reach. Casting a keen glance around, he gave a grunt of satisfaction, and threw himself down to await developments.

"He ought to have been here by this time, but I'm as well satisfied he didn't have to wait. There is no danger that he failed, and I wouldn't like to give him too much

time to think it all over. He might imagine the job was worth paying for again, especially if there was no solid lining to the pockets of the old man. It seems to me I hear him now. Better be cautious, though. It would make a high time in Dead Latch if they knew I was out, holding a confab with Hold Up Charley."

A little band of horsemen came swooping up, and Clark Bruce crouched lower on the short grass.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STRANGER AT THE GRAPEVINE.

"If you are there show up without fooling!" exclaimed the leader of the outfit, and who was none other than the fellow just named by Clark Bruce as Hold Up Charley.

"Go a little slow," promptly replied Bruce, rising upon his elbow.

"There seems to have been considerable work of one kind and another done around Dead Latch to-night, and it's just possible some one may be about to catch on to who were the workers. Mention no names, but give us the good word as soon as you have a mind to."

"The good word might be a heap better without any one being hurt. We are here and alive, which is about all we can say for ourselves. If you want to curse the matter over let drive. I can stand it as well now as any other time."

"What! You missed the game?"

"And the game missed us, which is about as much as one could ask under the circumstances. Have to pick your flint and try it again. He said he had only a poor hundred in his pocket, and it wasn't worth while to run much risk for that. I've known the time when he had ten times as much on hand, and thought nothing of it, either. I'll wait, now, till I know what I am going for, and then I'll be ready to hold straight."

"Curses on it! He escaped you, did he? You don't mean to say that one man carried too many guns for you and your gang?"

"He and a boy. There was a little shaver came into the game, who barked as loud as a full grown bull-dog. He kind of scared us off, I guess. We picked him up afterwards, but the blamed little cuss got away after all, and I don't know but what it was just as well. Everybody will know it was the work of Hold Up Charley."

"A boy! There seems to be a boy everywhere to-night. There was one chipped in to my game, if I am not mistaken. What was he like? I'd sooner have a full-grown man on my trail. Luck never helps him like it does the kid, and he's twice as careful about his fool neck."

"Ask Jimmy. He had the contract to drown him in the river, but while he was trying to get in his work some one from the other bank began a remonstrance with a Winchester and he threw up the job. Of course, that was the last we saw of the kid."

"But how did you come to fail in the first place? You hardly mean that a boy bluffed you off."

Hold Up Charley told the story rather as a joke, than as a matter to be angry about. He admitted that for once he was taken by surprise and off his guard. To the question why he did not follow on as soon as Ames had broken past he said that he knew too much to leave an enemy in the rear, and that by the time he had roused him out Ames was at home and behind his fortifications. There was no chance to take him by surprise, and they were not exactly ready to attempt an assault, which would be more than likely to fail, and thus put him doubly on his guard. By leaving him go the chances were that in a day or so he would have ceased all caution on account of what would be an almost forgotten incident.

"Perhaps it was for the best," said Bruce.

thoughtfully, when he had finished his story.

"I lost my man too; and I sent lead as straight for him as it ever went anywhere. The worst of it is, I can't spare the time to hunt him up, and it wouldn't look well if I did."

"Sort of a bad night for men, anyhow," laughed the outlaw.

"It might be worse. If he is alive, as I think he is, he has probably struck out for Honey Dew, and it won't be in his nature to stay under cover a bit longer than he can help. I'd give five hundred if some one would drop him before he gets back to Dead Latch, and save me the trouble. I can't wring the same game in on him twice."

"Bedad, an' av it's l'ave av absince the captain will be afther givin' me Oi'll take the job mesilf," interposed Jimmy O'Brien.

"Not sayin' I wouldn't give half the coin to the mon who hilped me wid the worruk."

"If our friend here chooses to trust you with the job you can have three days to do it in. After that I need you myself. You will have to meet us at the station by early candlelight, Thursday night. And I'll vouch for it that there couldn't be a better man to put on the case."

"Will you vouch for it that if he is pinched he will never squeal?" was Clark Bruce's question.

"Anybody could do the job after a fashion, but it's not every one who would be smart enough to get away."

"I'll vouch for Jimmy being solid every time, besides having the cunning of the Old Boy if you only let him have his own way to show it."

"Good enough then, I'll have a little talk with him, if you are not objecting, after we have settled what is to be in the matter of you know who."

There was considerable conversation carried on in a low tone with the captain, and as much more with O'Brien. When Clark Bruce turned back toward Dead Latch matters were once more arranged to his liking, and he hoped the failures of the night would be recouped before long.

Monte Saul had not altogether believed his disappearance would puzzle Bruce completely, but he had not expected it would be so promptly and shrewdly dealt with.

The wound in his shoulder was not at all dangerous, but the pain of it had turned him a little sick, and the fact that he had been foolish enough to turn over his revolvers to Dick Tredgar took some of the steel out of him.

He fancied that until located Bruce might or would postpone his attack on Angus Ames; and he wanted to be in his best shape before taking the hand he expected to in the game.

He had a friend in Honey Dew with whom he could rest, and perhaps there was something further to be learned there about Clark Bruce.

The distance to the town was not so many miles, and the walking was good, but Saul found the tramp harder than he had expected.

At first, excitement kept him going, but by the time he had decided he had left no trail behind him which could be read, and that for the future no care would be needed, he began to feel the effects of the strain. When he came banging against Diamond Dave's door it was not so far off of daybreak, and he was almost exhausted.

A day of rest toned him up wonderfully, and a plaster which Dave fixed on his shoulder held the edges of the wound together so well he hardly knew it was there. When evening came the two went down to the Grapevine.

Saul was heeled now, and felt he would have no particular objection to meeting Clark Bruce over again.

He had no intention of doing more than

stroll around a little, and take in the sights. Some word of it might go over to Dead Latch before he got there himself, but he had recovered so rapidly he had no objection. He never cared to hit a man when he was unwarned, and would just as soon Clark Bruce had some notice before they met again.

As he entered, half a dozen sports looked up from the table at which they had been gazing.

"Just the man we wanted!" shouted one of them.

"Hyer's a game that we don't have much show against. This galoot knows the cards by name, he does, and if you don't come up to help against the mighty, he'll kerry off the whole boodle of the camp. Chip in, Saul, an' the camp will give yer the funds to kerry, but we're bound to beat it somehow."

"Much obliged for the offer. I always reckoned to buy the box at my own funeral when the time came, but this is a game I have no use for."

"You cannot win if you do not bet," said the man at the table with sententious precision.

"And I can lose mighty much if I do. I know something about the habits of the anamile myself, and he can bite worse than the tiger. Besides, I'm in a bad streak just now, and I wouldn't want to win if I could, so I guess you boys can just keep on rustling the game till you get tired. To-night I'm not ashamed to confess I haven't the nerve."

The Mexican behind the table cast a little glance of scorn at the laughing gamester, and then proceeded to throw out his lay-out, and turn the deck to deal them out of hand. He knew nothing about Monte Saul, but he saw it was a surprise to those who did when he took water.

The game went on all the same, and the cards on the table were pretty fairly patronized.

Saul was not greatly interested in the game, but he would not have been himself at all if he had not kept a casual eye on it. The dealer was a stranger to him, and almost one to the town, but he handled the cards with the grace and skill of an adept, though not with the the unvarying good fortune complained of to Monte Saul by his friend when endeavoring to induce him to take a hand in the game.

The betting was lively, but it was not large, and though the banker was on the average a winner he was not likely to make a fortune at the rate things were progressing.

It was not very long before Diamond Dave fell a victim to the seductions of the game, and was banking his coin with the rest of them, in spite of the friendly warning Saul attempted to convey by a pressure of his elbow.

There was some rough talk, now and then, but that was part of the game, and the dealer went on with his work as though he was deaf, and whether he lost or won gave no sign of excitement.

The thing might have kept up all night, for it was something of a change to the boys, who enjoyed it though they did not care to strike it too hard. The interruption, if there was destined to be any, had to come from the outside, and in due course of time it seemed to be arriving.

Through the open door staggered rather than stepped a little stranger, who tried to prance up to the bar, though the attempt could be looked upon as a rank failure. He was an Irishman, if looks and brogue went for anything, and he was on the war-path from the word go.

He had a battered old plug hat, set jauntily on one side of his head, a short clay pipe, almost as black as the hat, was in his mouth, and in his hand he flourished a stout stick with a knob on the end of it.

"Phor the love av the blessid saints sit 'em up, barkeep. Oi am Phelim McGranaghan, out pho a lark, an' whin Oi sphread mesilf Rhome howls."

He brought his stick down on the bar with a great whack, and then began to caper in a most extraordinary manner, executing what he might have intended as a war-dance, but which required a drunken man to execute the figures.

"Go slow, thar, sonny, er thar will be trouble in the church," said the barkeeper, with a glance to see that his revolver lay ready to hand under the counter.

"This is no dance-house, an' don't you furgit it."

CHAPTER VIII.

BOLLIVAR BEN AND HIS BABY ELEPHANTS.

AT the sternly uttered words of the barkeeper the Irishman braced himself up, but not in any apparent terror.

He gazed at the speaker with a ludicrous stare, while he slowly drew from his pantaloons pocket a handful of coin. Then, he covered the one hand with the other, and shook the two till the musical jingle of gold against gold could be heard all over the room.

"D'yez moind the sound av that, me b'ye? An' w'ad yez foire out a custhomer loike Phelim McGranaghan phor a bit av loiveliniss, whin he's joost foive minnits in the land av love, an' ownly sthopped long enough at the infayrior places to take an idge off the ragin' thourst phot has been gatherin' phor thray long wakes."

"Now you begin ter talk a little closer to ther line. You kin eat an' drink hyer, but yer wants ter be blamed keerful how yer go about bein' merry. Reckon you ain't near ez drunk ez you 'peared ter be."

"Dhrunk! Phelim McGranaghan dhrunk! An' him ownly six or sivin dhrinks to the good, wid a good, long thray wakes av thourst to his cridit. But av it's the rule av the house, sure, an' he kin be doomb as a clam—more loss to the jintlemin who love illegant conversation, sthraked wid intertainmint."

The milder tone had its effect on the bartender, who thought he had succeeded in taming the intruder at the first effort. He had seen such cases often before.

When he noted that the potation poured out by Phelim was not more generous than the average he was satisfied that all present danger of a riot had been averted, and he was tacitly awarded the run of the house.

Nor did it take very long for the Irishman to get on speaking terms with a good many of the *habitués* of the place. If he did not let off his effervescent spirits in a wholesale manner he could talk in a rollicking undertone. In ten minutes he had won the hearts of the loungers, had made them laugh half a dozen times, and drink almost as often.

And, withal, if looks went for anything, he was less under the influence of the "cratur," as he called it, than when he came in.

All this could not go on without attracting the attention of Monte Saul, who generally had eyes for everything; but he had no part in it.

Diamond Dave was still interested in the game, and Saul was standing at his friend's shoulder, with coldly scrutinizing eyes watching the play.

The dealer seemed to be aware of the fact, for he looked up more than once, when luck seemed to be going rather against him, and the stakes were heavy; but always to meet that fixed gaze.

Saul noticed the fact, and smiled.

"Looks as though I had some particular attraction for him," he thought to himself.

"Wonder if he believes I will hoodoo his luck? More likely he wants to work his advantages, and is afraid I may catch him in the act. He hardly expects me to join them."

He was thinking of this when the second wave of trouble arrived at the Grapevine.

There was a rough trampling of feet, and four or five burly looking ruffians came stamping up to the bar.

Phelim was regaling an admiring auditory, and had just poured out a glass of whisky when an immense paw reached over his shoulder to settle on the tumbler, while a duplicate paw thrust him aside with a rough wave of strength.

Phelim went tumbling one way, his hat flew another, and his pipe shivered on the floor where his feet had been standing.

"Git out ov that an' let room fur a man all over. That's Bollivar Ben's benzine, an' hyer's Bollivar hisself ter drink it."

The tumbler went up into the air, lingered an instant around the mass of unkempt hair which almost concealed Bollivar Ben's face, while its contents disappeared in a twinkling.

But Bollivar had not come alone, for there were two or three more like to him in appearance if not in size, and they were all strangers in Honey Dew.

Without wasting any time they had corralled, each man, a glass, and between them captured the decanter. The evaporation of the fluids which followed was almost magical.

"Hoop la!" shouted the leader of the strange gang, as all the tumblers came back to the bar with a simultaneous crash.

"I'm Bollivar Ben, ther big elephant of ther Brazos, an' these hyer be ther baby elephants ov ther perairie. Take yer change outen that."

He threw down a gold piece; and then turned with a grin to meet Phelim McGranaghan.

At first, the little Irishman had stood as though spellbound, his red face growing redder, and his eyes almost ready to pop out of their sockets, after he had mechanically gathered himself from the floor. His short, bristly hair rose like that of an angry wolf, and his jaws moved savagely, though no sound came from between them.

As Bollivar Ben turned he sprung at him like a tiger.

The fracas arose so suddenly the barkeeper had no time to remonstrate. But, as this appeared to be a time when talk had to have something behind it, he was about to dive for his weapons when he was aware the drop was already on him.

"Hold off, Johnny. This are a case ov pure fun, an' you don't want ter try ter spile it. Han's on ther bar, an' fingers empty, er down yer go."

One of the "baby elephants" had him lined, and was talking as though he meant business.

Straight for Bollivar Ben the Irishman sprung, clutching with one hand and striking with the other as he came.

Ben's head went back, enough to break somewhat the force of the blow which otherwise would have gone fully home.

As it was, there was a resounding whack which told the Irishman knew how to hit, and how to hit hard; and he dodged back with scientific speed from the return which came slowly booming along.

By that time Phelim was cooler; but all the same, he went in for a hurricane fight, perfectly unmindful of the fact that the "baby elephants" had drawn their revolvers, and were keeping the ring with more regard to Ben's interests than his own, one of them exclaiming:

"Stiddy, thar, all you! Give 'em room fur their size. When Bolly hits I jest want ter see him drive ther kid inter ther ground."

Ben did not exactly succeed in doing that, but when one of his blows chanced to connect, in spite of a skillful dodge, and a scientific guard, Phelim went flying back almost to the opposite wall, driving three or four of the men of Honey Dew to this side

and that, or upsetting them altogether. It was a hard stroke, judged by its effects, and it was quite a surprise to see McGranaghan come flying back again to the attack.

Ben had lowered his hands; and they did not come up in time to ward off the sudden attack. Two or three times the assailant appeared to get in sharply on body and brow, and Ben actually began to give ground.

Then, one of the "baby elephants" threw out his foot, and tripped the following Phelim, at the same time exclaiming:

"Sot down on ther leetle runt! He's killin' more time ner we kin spare. He's drawin' his guns now!"

All this had passed more rapidly than it can be told, and the men of the town had been giving the strangers the floor. Phelim appeared to want to look after his own interests, and as long as there was fair play every one was willing he should do so.

But this began to look too much like murder, when the whole gang made a movement for the one man, and he down.

Honey Dew, in the persons of half a dozen of its fighters, started a rush, and just then Phelim sprung from the floor, shooting as he sprang.

It did not seem as though he had begun his work any too soon, for the "baby elephants" were coming as well, and it looked as though their intention was to tramp him into the ground.

Bollivar Ben leaped lightly to one side as the Irishman pulled trigger, and there was a suppressed exclamation, and the sound of a fall near the monte table.

CHAPTER IX.

MONTES SAUL HEARS THE LATEST.

THE exclamation was from Monte Saul, and it was the sound of his body striking against the floor which had been heard.

At the same time, he was perfectly unhurt, though amazed at the sudden and seemingly causeless attack which had sent him down, just in time to escape the bullet which went hissing over his head.

"Stiddy be jerks!" whispered a youthful voice in his ear.

"That's one ov Hold Up Charley's men, an' he's doin' Clark Bruce's dirty work. He hed yer lined when I cracked yer j'int's an' tole yer ter sot down."

A little paw on his shoulder held Monte Saul steady while this revelation was being made. Then, the boy dodged under the table, though, before he had gone, Saul had recognized him as his youthful friend of the night before, Harry Carter.

If it was true what the lad told it would be just as well to act with caution, for he had heard the hist of the bullet as it went along through the point in space lately occupied by his head, and could understand that nothing but his involuntary tumble had saved his life.

If the party who shot believed his first shot had done its work it was not likely he would try another, when the attention of every one had been drawn that way. Monte remained motionless for an instant, and then suddenly threw himself around, pistol in hand, and looked in the direction of the bar.

There was where the shot came from; and there was where there was now a confused medley. Men were dodging this way and that; some trying to get to the center of the fray, and others trying to get away from it.

"Bedad, av it's double tame yez are afther Phelim McGranaghan prefers a foot-race to a foight. Kim afther me av ye wants to foind where Oi live."

As he spoke he whirled a chair around him to open the way, and came bursting out from the throng, and made for the nearest window. One spring—the chair still in

front of him—and with a crash and jingle he went through the breaking sash, Bollivar Ben and his allies following close at his heels.

Monte Saul sprung to his feet in time to see the vanishment of the Irishman, and Bollivar Ben and his "baby elephants" streaming away after him, some by the window, and others by the door. If their cries were to be taken in good faith it would go hard with Phelim if they caught him.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Diamond Dave, looking up at a jagged little hole in the wall.

"There is heap more in luck than in judgment or you would have been elected for a hole in the ground. The infernal fool had you lined."

"Looks like it," said Monte, hesitating a moment, between a desire to follow the fugitive, and a curiosity to hear what other news Harry Carter might have to tell him.

"And, unless I'm away off, he didn't hold a bit straighter than he intended."

He did not wait to give any further explanations, for at that moment he saw Harry slipping through the crowd, and making his way to the door. There was nothing to keep him there any longer, and he followed at once.

"Be you lookin' fur them fellers, er did yer want ter see me?"

Harry had slipped in behind the sport, and flung the question at him in a way that was a surprise, for up to that moment he had not caught sight of the boy outside.

Still, Monte answered promptly enough, though in a tone which was not loud enough to be overheard by the men who were near.

"You first, of course. After that I may want an interview with the party who commenced that shooting. Men can make a mistake sometimes, and that is all right; but mistakes done on purpose ought to go over again, with the advantages the other way. Are you sure that was straight goods you gave me in there?"

"Dead sure, beyond ther shadder ov a doubt, an' when yer hears what I got ter tell ye, you'll see things ther same way."

With that he began the history of the preceding evening's entertainment.

The reader is already acquainted with what happened up to the time when Jimmy O'Brien was about to dispose of the boy, and Angus Ames opened on him with his Winchester, from the other side of the river.

Harry found little trouble after that in making his way to the opposite bank, but he did not think it worth while to go near Ames, since that gentleman might begin asking questions to which he was not certain he knew the proper answers.

He satisfied himself, however, that it was the mill-owner who had come to his aid, and then, after making sure the outlaws were not attempting to follow him, proceeded down the stream for a little, and finally crossed again to follow them.

Captain Hold Up was in no great hurry, and there were advantages for concealment which the boy was prompt to use. He managed to creep up so close that he heard something of the conversation held among them, and though no names were mentioned, it was not hard for him to catch the meaning of the most that was said.

"Pretty long tramp fur me mammy's eldest orphan, but if I ain't thar ter hear furder d'velopments, Clark Bruce kin call me a baldheaded leetle liar. With a short cut an' limber legs reckon I kin beat even Hold Up Charley."

He had heard where the trysting-place was, and knew the spot well enough. When Bruce made his appearance, Harry was there before him, and heard, not altogether to his surprise, the arrangements which were made for a further raid on Monte Saul.

How he made his way to Honey Dew, and how he got track of O'Brien and his assis-

tants, turning up at the Grapevine just at the right time, was briefly told, and Monte Saul warmly returned his thanks to his little ally.

"That settles it, then," continued Saul, after he was through with his thanks.

"They are after me, now, and for some reason or other that I do not altogether understand. They seem to want to get me out of the way first, and then follow up with Angus Ames, as closely as may be."

"That's ther program. You fu'st, Angus next, an' ther lady last ov all. It's a kinder a puzzler ter Charley, hisself, but it don't keep him awake ov nights. Now, pard, ef it ain't askin' too much, what yer goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"Move on the works of the enemy, my boy. They have failed again, and that gives me time to lay out the campaign. Until they make the raffle with Monte Saul it looks as though Angus Ames and his daughter could sleep serenely at night."

"Thar's jest whar you're out, pard. Jimmy didn't stop ter see yer crawlin' out frum under ther table, an' ez he shoots considerable straight he'll go back an' swar ye'r ready fur ther bone-yard. Don't fool yerself on ther outfit. Hold Up Charley ain't stayin' too long in one place, an' he'll git in his work to-morrer night—ef he don't crowd ther mourners an' try ter hev ther funeral afore daybreak."

"There is something in what you say, and it is a pity perhaps I did not send in a shot to tell them I was alive. Only, if I had, he would have never got back to his headquarters to report. Clark Bruce must be a bigger rascal, even, than we thought, to have been able to bring the road-agents to help him in the game."

"Yep! Shouldn't wonder ef he used ter b'long to ther gang. But what yer goin' ter do 'bout it; an' what yer want me ter be doin'?"

"I will waste no more time here. The mark left by Clark Bruce's bullet has turned out to be but a flea-bite. To-morrow I will be as well as ever, and as fit for a fight. I will go back to Dead Latch, go back to the man who has sworn to rid the world of my presence. With him under my feet the game against Angus Ames comes to an end—and I'll put him there, no matter what the act may reveal. With his life to my credit Angus Ames ought to—forget, if nothing more."

It was pretty certain there was a meaning in his words beyond the boy, but that troubled him little. What he cared to know was his own part in the game. He repeated his question, with a little different wording, and this time got an answer, though it was not altogether to his liking.

"For what you have done you have made a friend of Monte Saul; but that may be a doubtful blessing. It will be work that is dangerous for a full grown man, and it would be a sin to assign a part in it to a boy. Best stand to one side—if there is no way in which I can reward you now. When the battle is over I will see that you do not regret the part you have already taken—if I am living. If I am dead a word to Angus Ames will make him your friend if I mistake not. And that word I will put it in your power to say."

"Thankee, pard, but I kin gen'rally find words ter say fur meself, an' bein' ez luck seems ter hev dealt me a hand I don't perpose ter jump ther game tell ther last keard are played. Ef you can't find me a place in ther scrimmage I'll jest slosh 'round on me own hook. Ef I do more damage ner good yer kin blame yerself. I've froze on ter Monte Saul fur a pard, an' I perpose ter stay with him ef ther last horn blows."

"Shake, little man!" exclaimed Monte Saul, extending his hand.

"I have never gone back on a pard yet, and I won't begin with you. Meet me in

Dead Latch to-morrow—or, better, out at the Break of Day. I think I can see a way to use you without putting your head in much danger, and yet give you a chance to see the fun. Go now. I must get back to Dave and let him know I am off for the home base."

CHAPTER X.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

THE two shook hands and then separated. It might not be well for them to be seen together, since there was no telling what spies Clark Bruce might have in Honey Dew.

Monte went back to the Grapevine to find his friend, while Harry Carter, having slept the greater part of the day, determined to utilize the night by getting back to Dead Latch under its cover. He thought it possible he might be able to get his eyes again on the principal villain of the plot, and if he did so he believed he would be able to obtain information which was worth accumulating.

It would take him a couple hours of easy traveling to make the distance, and for a boy in perfect health and training that did not amount to much. There was bright moonlight to show him his way, and his revolver was loaded and ready for any foes who might appear along the road. In very good spirits he frolicked along, with only the hazy glimmering of a suspicion that he might meet Hold Up Charley or some of his gang.

That idea had no particular terrors for him, since he had escaped them already, and did not see why the performance should not be kept up *ad libitum*.

He had covered a good part of the distance, and was congratulating himself there was so little further to go, when the remembrance of the interview between Clark Bruce and the road-agents popped into his head, and he looked wistfully in the direction of the spot where it had taken place.

"It's quite a piece out ov ther road, but what are legs fur? Like ez not I'll find 'em bunched thar, waitin' fur Jimmy ter come an' report. I wouldn't mind hearin' that same report meself, an', by mighty, I've a noshun ter do it."

Without waiting to argue the matter with himself he turned sharply aside, and augmenting his speed hurried toward the spot.

He knew the lay of the land well, and there would be no trouble in approaching it without being discovered, so that in case the outlaws were there he did not think he was running any great risk.

He might learn something in regard to the matter on foot against Angus Ames; and, what was almost as important, he might hear something which would enable him to locate the den, of which he had heard something; and of the nature of the work that was on hand for the following Thursday night. The nearer he got to the spot the more reasons he found for his little side journey, and he was quite disappointed, as he came within hearing distance, that the murmur of voices did not reach his ears. That was what he had been confidently expecting.

He did not lose caution for all that.

This was as good a place as any to rest, and he dropped noiselessly to the ground, stretched himself at full length, rested his chin in his hands, and listened.

Everything was silent around him. There was not even the note of a night bird to be heard, and if he had been given to nerves he might have found the loneliness oppressive.

There were plenty of other things for him to think about, however, and finally he was so deeply engaged, turning them over in his mind, that he was almost taken off his guard when he heard a low, trilling whistle, which sounded almost at his side.

Some one had approached as quietly as he had done, and was giving a signal. It sounded so like to his own style of work that he came near giving an answer himself.

He soon saw that all of his caution had not been thrown away. There was silence; but it was only for about the space of a minute.

Then came an answer. There had been someone within half a dozen rods or so of him, all the time.

"It's there yez are?" exclaimed a voice the boy had no difficulty in recognizing as belonging to Jimmy O'Brien.

"Sure, an' Oi began to think Oi war all be meself alone, barrin' the baby elephants at the Brazos. Roight out av the din av lions we are, wid heads up, an' troonks a shquir-min'."

"It's time you were coming. What's the best word?"

"Sowld ag'in, an' another angel made happy, av me eyes didn't desave me."

"No mistake about it this time, is there?"

"Not onliss he's a charrumed loife. We kicked up the most illegant bobberty, an' thin Bolly shtipped out av the way an' Oi hild sthraight, crooked me finger, an' saw him dhrap. What more wad yez have?"

"His scalp, of course. With a man like Monte in the case there's nothing less will go for evidence."

"Yez kin have it an' wilcome, but you'll have to go an' git it. Wid all Honey Dew comin' phor me, an' Johnny racin' on dher the bar phor his two revolvers Oi lift in the fourst boat; an' be the same token, Oi've the sash wid me. It's a bahd place to hit the wrong man, is that same Ghrapevoine, an' Doiamond Dave wor there to haul on the rope."

"I suspect you were more afraid Monte would come to life again; and that is what is troubling the court here. He seems to be a pretty hard man to kill. I had a try at him once myself."

"Sure, an' Oi won't ask paymint phor the job till it's sure we are that he's wint over ther range. We'll know whin Andy comes. Oi lift him to bring the news, phor he didn't go into the Ghrapevoine at all."

Hold Up Charley, who had been carrying on the conversation with the Irishman, gave a short laugh.

"All right if you called the turn on him; but if you and your little army missed it I'll put you all into the rear rank and try my hand at it myself. Our friend is too everlasting careful about how he gets his man out of the road. When I take a hand I'll do it, and there will be no more foolishness."

Jimmy would no doubt have had an answer for this had it not been for a sudden interruption.

"I've got you, kid. Don't you kick or you are a dead duck!"

That was the exclamation which came sharply to their ears, and it was followed by the sound of a slight struggle, and the gurgle of a cry that was cut off at its very commencement.

Master Harry had been so interested in the conversation in front of him he had forgotten to guard his rear, and had been taken in with a neatness and certainty that admitted of no resistance.

"Steady, there!" continued the voice.

"Here's some one who can give you all the news, and I reckon you've seen something of him before."

"Bring him in, then," answered the captain, who had recognized the voice; and Harry Carter was dragged, unresisting, out of his cover, and into the immediate presence of the men who were squatted around on the grass.

"Mighty Moses! It's our boy of the ford! He must live around here. What's the little whelp after now? You don't mean to say he has been getting in the road again?"

"Looks a heap like it. Jimmy must have tripped up on his shot, for I saw Monte and this kid come out of the Grapevine together. They had some chin together and

then Monte went one way, and the kid another. I dodged after Monte, to see if I couldn't get a shot at him, but he dodged under cover before I had the chance, and as I could see the fat was in the fire, and couldn't hear of any one else being dead or badly wounded, I lit out for the home base.

"And how did you come to strike him, after all? If you trailed him in, you let him have a comfortable time listening before you gave us the office."

"All pure, hog luck. I thought I'd see if I couldn't hear a little of what was going on, so that, maybe, I'd have a chance to run Jimmy. I came up mighty quiet to where I thought I could hear you buzzing, and dropped on the kid before he knew I was around. He's not over big; but he's awful nasty. What you going to do with him?"

"Get rid of him on the spot," growled the road-agent, his hand dropping to the knife at his belt. "He's bad medicine, if he is done up in a small package."

There was no smile on the face of the dashing road-agent now, and the boy believed he meant every word he said. It looked as though he had a very short lease on life, and so perhaps he would have had but for an interruption that came as a surprise.

He had not guessed Clark Bruce was in the party, for he now heard his voice the first time.

"Not much, if you please. I don't want a corpse lying around here. It's not likely any one saw me come out, but who knows? If they found him, there are always infernal idiots to put one and one together. Take him along, and when you get him off my stamping-ground, do as you please. Right here I don't want the thing done, and I won't have it."

"Good as wheat," responded Charley, without showing the least sign of anger at the interruption.

"Here, little boy, run along home. You don't know a thing anyhow, and pard, here, will be glad to see you in the morning. Let him go, Andy."

"If you can stand it, I guess I can. There has been a botch all around, and I don't see he can make it any worse."

Bruce spoke carelessly, but his hand dropped to his hip, and he watched the boy narrowly.

"Perhaps you are right," said the captain, thoughtfully. "Jimmy, I'll give you one more job, and see if you can't do it right. Take him to the den, and have him there when I come in."

"Alive or did?" asked Jimmy, anxiously.

"Alive for choice, but it makes little difference."

Jimmy took possession of his prisoner and turned away. He knew that his carefully laid scheme had been a failure and he wanted to hear nothing more about it.

Had he lingered a little he might have heard the particulars of the conversation which Andy had managed to listen to, though it did not seem of much importance save for the fact that Monte Saul had made an appointment for the next day at the Break of Day Mine, with the boy.

"That's business, at last!" exclaimed the captain.

"If you say so, Clark, we'll lay for him, and down him somewhere along the road. I was sort of saving the gang up for the grand coup, but a man more or less won't make much difference to Dead Latch, and if he gets away with the whole of us that will be the end of it."

"Thanks, but I prefer not. It all depends on how he goes to the Break of Day. If he cuts across the country, and crosses the river at the ford, I'll be ready for him myself."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WORK OF AN ASSASSIN.

CLARK BRUCE had rapidly run the matter over in his mind, and come to a quick conclusion.

From what Monte Saul had said it seemed as though he did not care to pass through Dead Latch on his way to the mine, and though that might be a mistaken idea, yet Bruce saw how he could take advantage of it if it was correct.

To go direct from Honey Dew to the mine by way of the ford would save several miles, and for a man on foot the trail would be about as easy as the one leading through Dead Latch. There was one place where, to take the shortest cut, the way would lead up from the river by a narrow path along the face of the bluff, but for a man who looked a little to his footing it offered little of danger.

He said nothing further of the plan which had darted into his head, but continued:

"Let Monte alone unless I set you on him again. I began the racket, and I'll finish it up. Where I want you is with the old man; and this time there will be no failure. I'll double the wages and be on the ground myself, to show how the thing ought to be done. Win or lose in the game for Monte's life, the time will soon be here to strike."

And as, an hour later, Clark Bruce turned away from that midnight conference he shrugged his shoulders, muttering to himself:

"There's a heap sight of gratitude in Hold Up Charley. I saved his life once and he's willing to take half a dozen to make up for it—provided I throw in a proper consideration for boot. He's not a half bad man to have for a friend; but I'd hate awfully to have him on my trail as an enemy."

Bruce had made no mistake about the probable intentions of Monte Saul.

For the present, the sport did not care to be seen in Dead Latch, and the way by the ford to his mine was the shorter course.

When he left Honey Dew he followed the trail for the mill, which branched off from the one to the town, and swung along at a lively pace. There was a mark on his shoulder, and over that a patch, but he was none the worse for either.

The revolvers with which Diamond Dave had supplied him were convenient to his hands, and he had no fears that his progress would be interfered with.

When he reached the river he halted for a moment, and looked toward the cottage of Angus Ames, and the mill in the distance.

What were they thinking about there? How much did they know of the danger he believed was threatening them?

His gaze was wistful, but he shook his head, and murmured somewhat bitterly:

"Now, now. A man who bears the name of Monte Saul would hardly be received with a welcome by straight-laced Angus Ames, even if he came with a warning on his lips that was worth the hearing. Some other day, perhaps. Yet I wonder if he really suspects. I might have told more of the truth in that letter—and only made matters worse."

He drew himself up, turned his face toward the river, and slowly made his way across the ford.

Right there the water ran over and between rocks which, by daylight, gave him a footing, and save for a little moisture on his high boots he could hardly tell that he had been in the water.

His course now led along the bank of the river, and it took him altogether closer to the cottage and the mill than he cared to go, but he was screened somewhat by the timber, and near the dam he turned a little and struck into the path which took him up the timber-lined bluff, toward the Break of Day.

It was narrow, and fairly clung to the edge of the steep incline, winding its way upward over a ledge that cropped out barely enough to furnish a good foothold. There was little danger, yet one wanted to guard his footsteps somewhat, since a stumble would most likely mean a fall to the level of the river, with either broken bones or a cold bath at the bottom.

As he began the ascent Monte glanced upward.

The way seemed clear, and he hardly remembered that the path wound in and out of sight, as it went upward.

Twenty feet or more above the level of the stream he paused and looked over toward the mill and the cottage.

The mill was quiet and deserted. Men were back in the timber, cutting logs, but they were too far away for him to hear the strokes of their axes. So far as he could see, no one was in range of vision.

"All the better," he thought, and then—as he turned an angle of the rocky wall a club came swooping down on his head with a force there was no resisting.

Monte did not even stagger.

He threw up his hands with an instinctive motion of defense, but at the same time went pitching downward from the path.

As Clark Bruce bent over the ledge there was a splash; and as he looked a little longer the body arose to the surface, and he uttered a savage curse as he saw that Monte Saul was paddling after a mechanical fashion, with just enough life in him to keep himself afloat as he slowly drifted down the stream.

"Brought him ther fu'st clatter!" chuckled a voice immediately behind him, and its owner crept out from the niche where he and several other men were crouching.

For answer Clark Bruce pointed at the body in the river.

"Curse him, will nothing kill him?" he ground out.

"The clip would have sent you or I over the range, and he goes swimming away as though nothing had happened."

"Ef he don't put on more steam, he won't swim very fur," replied the other.

"He's gittin' ther force ov ther current now, an' afore he knows ar'ything he'll take ther shoot over ther dam. By that time thar won't be much ov him left ter bury. Reckon yer rid ov him now."

"There will be enough for Dead Latch to recognize Monte Saul, and it's ten to one the body will float right along down to the town and then lodge on the bank to rise up in judgment against us. Quick! We must head it off, drag it out, and bury it somewhere. It would be too risky to bring it back and sink it in the dam with a stone to it. Follow me!"

He darted down the narrow path; and yet paused once, as he caught a view of the river, and the body with upraised hands, trembling on the breast of the dam. It was a sight to haunt one's dreams, and yet his only thought was that it was fortunate the mill was deserted, and the man away.

Deserted the mill was, yet the spot was not so secure from observation as he had deemed.

It happened that Angus Ames and his daughter were abroad as Monte Saul was making his way up the bluff. Though they did not recognize him, they saw his figure and aimlessly followed it with their eyes.

When he reached the angle in the path they saw him throw up his hands and pitch backward into the river.

"Heavens! There must have been some one lurking there. He fell like one who had received a blow."

Had Angus Ames looked upward then he would have seen the crouching form of Clark Bruce, but his gaze was on the form that seemed scarcely to have strength to struggle with the water.

"He will go over the dam!" exclaimed Ames, taking in the situation like a flash. "He may catch on the bank, but I doubt it. Stay here. I will cross at the ford. I may save him yet."

He dashed away as he spoke, and was hardly conscious that Ethel was skimming along in his rear. When he had crossed the river she had gained a place at his side.

They were too late to avert the plunge, but as yet the body had not passed them. An eddy had flung it in to the bank, and they came upon it with head on the sand, face above water, and heels swinging gently to the current.

Angus Ames drew the body up from the water and allowed it to rest upon the shore, while Ethel tore open his collar and felt for the beating of his heart. Very white and still was Monte Saul, yet there was no mark of bruise or blow, and the water might not have slain altogether.

No flutter of the heart did there seem to be, but her hand fell upon a little locket, secured by a ribbon around his neck, and at this she gave a glance before she covered her face with her hands, while Angus Ames sprang to his feet with a sharp exclamation. Four men came bursting out of the shrubbery at his back, and suddenly halted, as much surprised at his presence as he was at theirs.

"Back, you infernal assassins!" exclaimed Ames.

At that moment he knew no fear, though he stood facing them without a weapon. Clark Bruce was in the lead, and the others turned to him as if awaiting orders.

Bruce did not lose his presence of mind, though a red flush of anger crept over his face.

"What do you mean, Mr. Ames?" he coolly asked.

"It looks as though, if any killing had been done you were as apt to have had a finger in it as any one. We were hastening to his aid—do you want him to die on your hands?"

"You know what I mean. I saw this poor boy ascending the path over the bluff, and it was your hand which struck the blow that hurled him into the river."

He pointed full at Clark Bruce as he spoke, and the hand of Dick Tredgar crept into his side pocket for a pistol, while the three looked to Clark Bruce for their orders.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BOY AT THE WINDOW.

If Angus Ames had only known it his life hung as it were on a hair.

After what he said the companions of Clark Bruce hardly expected to see him leave the place alive, and if all things had been ready perhaps he never would have done so.

But Bruce could be as cool as the coolest; and so long as no one else heard the charge he did not feel that much damage was done. He faced Angus Ames steadily, an expression of indignation rising on his countenance as he seemed finally to take in the magnitude of the charge.

After a little he seemed to find words, though smothering his wrath by an effort.

"Heaven forgive you for the charge you have made. It means murder has been done and those who know me best would tell you what answer should be given to the charge."

While he spoke he was thinking rapidly.

It did not seem possible that Ames had actually seen the blow struck though no doubt his eyes had been on Monte when he fell. If he had only been certain he would have known exactly what answer to give.

But if Angus had got the merest glimpse of him denial would do no good, and a different line would have to be taken.

So, he made up his mind to confess and avoid, and as Ames dropped his pointing finger Bruce continued:

"You are wrong altogether, and yet you may not understand. There has been bad blood between this Monte Saul and me, and he had sworn to have my life on sight. Yet I would not have taken an unfair advantage, or fought him in any way that the public opinion of Dead Latch would not have allowed."

"Say no more. When war has been declared Dead Latch justifies the assassin who is the quickest to draw. A blow or a thrust is no worse than a pistol-shot, and alike the villains who give them may go unhanged."

"I tell you, you are altogether wrong. He came suddenly upon me, and when I reached for my pistol he sprang back, forgetting where he was. He was my enemy, but when I saw him go down I would have done what I could to aid him. Is he so surely dead? If not, tell me how I can give him help and see whether it will not be heartily bestowed."

Angus Ames glanced at the body. He began to realize this was no time for recriminations.

Monte lay just as he had placed him, and there was no color in his cheek or life in his face.

And yet he did not altogether seem the dead man. He was here with these men, unarmed, and hampered by the presence of his daughter. He stooped and lifted the wrist which lay almost at his feet.

"I know not whether he is dead or alive, but this is no place for him to recover. My house is not far away and if you are anxious to prove your words, help me carry him there. If he is dead I will assure him of decent burial."

"No, no!" exclaimed Ethel, excitedly.

"He is not dead. I felt a faint flutter of his pulse. Bring him to our home and we will nurse him back to life again."

Clark Bruce seemed willing enough to undertake the task, and his men nodded as he winked. Under the direction of Ames they turned the body face downward and then raised him from the ground.

"He hasn't the weight of a dead man," said Dick Tredgar, as they bore their burden lightly down toward the ford.

"It's ten to one he will be 'round and kicking before sundown an' I'd just as soon be away when he comes to. He'll be apt to pull his guns and begin shooting mighty sudden after he gets his eyes open."

It was a fair hint to draw Monte's teeth, but Clark Bruce paid no attention to it. He did not believe the seemingly dead man would come to life very soon, and at present it was not so easy to search the body. Ames was watching them as they walked and it would take little to arouse his suspicions. He was satisfied the way things were going, and he believed that by the time they reached the cottage there would be but little hope of reviving Saul, even if he were not as yet altogether dead.

It made quite a little procession.

The four men carried the body of their victim while the mill-owner walked at the side, and Ethel brought up the rear, watching every movement of the men even more closely than her father.

The steady tramp, slow though it was, brought them to the cottage at last, and as they neared it, the elderly man who was known as John—and seldom any thing else—came out and stared in amazement, and some fright, at the unexpected sight. When he had seen that Ethel and her father were of the party he went back in haste, and when the six entered through the door he had left open he was nowhere to be seen.

"Place him on that lounge," said Ames, hurrying on into the next room.

He was gone but a moment, and when he came back he carried a bottle of brandy in his hand; but he had hastily thrust a revolver into his hip-pocket, and did not feel

quite as nervous as when he was unarmed and introducing into his house what might turn out to be a pack of wolves.

He knew that he could not guard himself at all points while attempting to revive Monte, but there was at least a chance for successful resistance should the time come when it would have to be made.

With a stern look on his face he went about his work, and certainly he did his whole duty by the unfortunate Monte. Whether Clark Bruce helped or hindered most it would have been hard to say, but he started back and gave a quick glance at his companions as the first sign of a flush appeared upon the cheeks which had been so pale until now.

"He must never wake again," was the muttered thought. "If he does we may as well have it out here and now, dangerous though it may be. If I could only give one of them the wink to look after the old fool who saw us coming and then get out of the way. With him living to give the alarm the cake would be all dough."

He glanced around and caught Dick Tredgar's eye.

With a scowl and a shake of the head he managed to convey something of his meaning, for without attracting the attention of any one else Dick managed to slip from the room.

"He is coming back to life!" exclaimed Clark, as he stepped forward again. "It seems like a blessed miracle. I will not feel so much like the assassin you tried to make me out to be."

But at the same time his hand went back to his hip in search of a weapon. The crisis appeared to be at hand.

Angus Ames saw nothing of the movement. His attention was altogether centered on the deathlike face which was turned up to his own.

There was a gasp from between the white lips, and Clark Bruce's hand began to leave his hip, while two more hands were suspiciously near to the place where they carried their weapons. Ames had admitted the tigers to his home and it looked now as though they were making ready to spring. The catastrophe might have come had it not been for a sound at the open window at their backs.

That sound was made by a pair of hammers being drawn sharply back. It was familiar enough to every one in the room, and though Clark Bruce believed it was from Dick Tredgar's revolvers, and was not so much startled as he might have been, he glanced that way.

No Dick Tredgar was this, but he saw the grinning face of a boy whose arms rested on the window sill, and whose either hand clutched a revolver, the muzzle of which was pointed uncomfortably straight for Clark and his friends.

"That's right," chirruped Harry.

"That's my pard ye'r workin' at, Mister Ames, an' you're a-bringin' him over ther riffle accordin' ter Gunter. When he gits a good an' ready he'll clear this ranch ov these hyer hyeners so quick it'll make yer head swim. But till he does, Clarky, I'm a-hold-in' ov ther drop meself, an' ef you b'lieved what Hold Up Charley told yer you know I'm mighty lively on ther shoot."

The interruption was a double surprise, for Bruce had been sure this boy, if not dead, was safely imprisoned at the road-agents' "den."

Yet not the least trace of it appeared in his face.

"Who is this young lunatic?" he coldly asked of Angus Ames.

"Does he belong in your family? If so he can play his antics in tolerable safety, though he ought to be whipped and sent to bed."

"I know little about him," was the short response, given without a glance from the

face in which the color of life was still rising higher.

"He has a good position from which to see the show, and he had better stay there till the play is over, or there is a shift in the scene. He can do no harm, and may do good."

"You bet I may; an' I kin; an' I will. An' as fur yer pard, Clarky, that ye'r expectin' ter slide around an' pick me up, he showed his teeth too soon, an' got left. Uncle John hez him treed 'round ther house, an' are watchin' him with a double barrel shot-gun. Ef I know ary thing about Dutch you better git yer baggage checked an' leave on the fu'st train. Monte are comin' 'round fast, an' when he gits a glimps' ov yer hyer thar will be blood on ther moon."

Monte Saul himself could not have reeled this off with more *sang froid*, and at the same time kept the party so thoroughly covered.

One of his barrels devoted its attention exclusively to Clark Bruce, while the other appeared to take in the rest of the party. Hold Up Charley might have taken chances and tried to break the dead-lock, but Clark Bruce occupied a different position, and neither could or would be as reckless.

He knew now that Monte was still alive, and nothing which Angus Ames could say would seriously harm him. The necessity for quick action was over provided this infernal boy could be silenced, and at the moment he saw no way of doing it except by the wholesale slaughter he wished to avoid.

It was plain that for the present Angus Ames was desirous of having another witness, and that he would resent any attack on the lad, however mildly it might be made.

All this Bruce thought over like lightning, and his decision was made even before Harry was done speaking.

"The boy is an impudent little brat, who deserves trouncing, yet there is a grain of truth in what he says. If Monte found me here when he came to his senses he would be apt to shoot first and ask for explanations afterward. He is cruel as a tiger, and deadly as a snake, and the less a gentleman has to do with him the better. I have done all and more than I intended on the first impulse, and am free to confess I would feel a great deal more safe had he never revived. Yet you may give him my compliments and tell him what I have done for him. My friends and I will retire. Good-morning."

"An' ef yer wants ter take yer pard along Mister Ames hed better hev a gun in both fists an' go out ter git him outen ther tree. Johnny means bizziness, an' ef he saw him a-gittin' down 'thout orders he'd be apt ter let both barrels go."

Bruce and his men had filed out of the door, and as he spoke Harry leaped lightly in, through the window.

"Go," said Ethel, to her father.

"The boy is right. I will watch here till you come back."

There was more truth than poetry in what Harry had said. Dick Tredgar had been neatly captured, and had not Ames come to his rescue it might have gone hard with him. Still covered by the shot-gun he slouched away to join his friends, and the four took their departure, somewhat to the surprise, but decidedly to the delight, of Harry Carter.

"That leaves ther coast clear fur me an' my pard, an' ef we can't hold ther fort we o'rter lose it. That's all. Stiddy, pard. Ye'r comin' 'round ther curve, with steam up, an' no slack couplin's."

Sure enough, Monte opened his eyes, looked weakly around, and after a bit of silence murmured:

"Back, you villain. Turn your wrist and I'll blow you cold."

CHAPTER XIII.

LITTLE BUT GOOD.

MONTÉ evidently thought he was still facing his assailant, and his hand made a motion the boy understood well enough. Had the sport been a little stronger he would have been training a revolver in the face of Angus Ames.

"Go slow, Pard Saul. Bruce an' his gang hez skipped this ranch, an' these hyer are friends. Shut yer eyes, take a weenty bit more ov ther oh be joyful, an' in five minutes by ther clock you'll be up an' shout-in'."

Monte understood the words, recognized the voice, and fell back with a sigh of relief. He was recovering strength with wonderful rapidity, and his mind was becoming clear as well.

"I'd 'a' bin hyer sooner, pard, but Hold Up Charley mounted me ag'in, got me foul, an' started me off fur his den."

"I went along with yer friend Jimmy peaceable ez a lamb. Speshully ez afore long he got me on hossback with him. But when I made out about whar that same den orter be I reckoned I had bizziness some other way an' give him a keerless heave that sent him outen ther saddle an' come nigh ter breakin' his neck. Ef I hedn't turned that crittur loose fur fear ov bein' hung fur a hoss-thief ef I struck ther real man ez owned it I'd 'a' bin hyer sooner; but I arrove early enough fur Clark Bruce, an' which accounts fur everybody bein' right side up an' ther enemy a-runnin'."

"But what has happened? Where am I?"

Monte had grown stronger yet. His voice had something like its old ring of determination.

"I dunno ez I know, an' I dunno ez I want ter know what hez happened, but ye'r safe in ther house ov Angus Ames. Rest yer weary bones, take a good long snooze, an' then you'll be ready fur what's ter come next."

Monte slowly drew himself up, and stared around.

Ethel was behind him and he did not see her, but Angus Ames was near him, a stern, unrecognizing look in his cold, gray eyes.

"Not in this house," muttered the sport.

"I am strong enough to work my way to the Break of Day if a dozen Clark Bruces stood between it and me. Stay here and put them on their guard. Tell them all the truth as you know it. I will find you again when the time comes. I am going now."

He was staggering away as he spoke, but his strength was returning rapidly, and though Harry followed him a little, and looked wistfully after him, he saw that Monte was almost himself again, and finally he stood and gazed after him till he was out of sight.

Then he turned and came back to Angus, who had neither moved nor spoken while the sport was so abruptly taking his departure.

"Who is that man?" asked Ames, as the lad reached the doorway.

"Bless yer soul, yer don't mean ter tell me yer don't know him? That are Monte Saul, what owns ther Break ov Day Mine, an' are ez fair an' square a sport ez ever drewed breath. He 'pears ter be moultin' ther last few days, an' sorter onder ther weather, but when he's in good order an' they crowd him, he kin make ther feathers fly—oh, my!"

"Monte Saul? A gambler, of course, with such a title. What is his other name?"

"Blamed ef I know ef he's got one. Leastwise, it don't appear in general use."

"But you say he owns ther Break of Day Mine. Is it worth anything, or is it simply a hole in the ground, salted to sell?"

"It's hissen, sure enough; and they do say he kin cut out ther solid chunks ov ore. He ain't bin gamblin' much sence he got inter that, an' ef Clark Bruce don't down him,

an' jump his claim, he'll soon be stiddy ez a jedge, an' fit ter go in double harness."

"What is the trouble between these two men?"

"Hard ter size it all up, but firstly, Bruce hez a claim right along side ov hissen, what ain't wuth shucks, an' they do say Bruce are goin' ter take it by ther tail an' swing it 'round till it laps over Break ov Day. Afore he does that he'd jest ez soon hev ther owner ov it outen ther way. Monte ain't ther man ter stand sich."

"But what right has he in another man's property?"

"Oh, he's 'rangin' that ez he goes along. He seems ter want ter have a hack at you, an' that's a-worryin' Monte a heap sight more than his own affairs."

"At me?"

"Yes. He told me I should tell yer how ther land lay, and I reckon he meant it. It war him ez sent me out hyer t'other night with a warnin', an' him with Bruce's ball in his shoulder at ther time. If't hedn't bin fur that, Hold Up Charley'd taken yer in out ov ther damp fur sure."

"Thank you, my boy. I will try to make up to you for it. You struck in nobly, and I have been troubling myself ever since that I did not stay by you closer, though I saw you make your final escape from the river. Perhaps I helped you somewhat in that."

"Helped a heap, and I'm yourn truly. Jimmy had orders ter leave me there an' he meant ter do it."

"And as for this Monte, as you call him, I desire to have little to do with such men, but you can tell him that if an attack if ever made on his title to the land it cannot hurt him as long as it does not come through me,—and while he or I live that will never be."

"Eh? Anythin' fishy about that hole in ther ground?"

"Never mind about it. I had been arranging all that when the road-agents met me. If they had cleaned my pockets as they threatened, they might have got a paper that could render things awkward for your friend, though I had, and have, no intention of using it against him."

"That's squar' an' noble. Looks like you war kinder takin' a int'rest in other folks affairs too."

"It was simply justice, say no more about it. Yet,—can it be that the road-agents intended to get possession of that very paper?"

"Betcher sweet life. Clark Bruce'd give a dollar fur it, an' Clark and Hold Up Charley are thick ez thieves, which they be."

"And who is this Clark Bruce?"

"That's your riddle, an' I ain't good at conundrums unless I know ther answer."

The boy had little more to tell, save what was patent to all of Dead Latch, and on those matters Angus Ames showed himself to be pretty well posted. When, finally, Harry announced that as he had been on the rampage all the preceding night, he wanted to go somewhere and take a snooze, Angus first placed him outside of a hearty dinner and then installed him in a bed, where he was soon in the Land of Nod.

When he awoke again it was after sun-down.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed after he had hunted up Ames.

"I on'y wanted a snooze, an' you let me sleep tell I don't know ther day afore yesterday from the night after to-morrer. It's too late ter hunt up Monte now, an' ef I war-n't afeared they'd come an' burn ther house over our heads I'd camp right down hyer till to-morrer."

"Camp then," answered Angus, with something like a smile on his stern face.

"I will guarantee your safety while you sleep."

"Yes, but, my gracious, who's ter look arter youn? Guess we'll both keep our eyes open, fur soon ez Monte goes up ther

flume they'll come back hard on you an Miss Ethel. An' who knows whar Monte are now?"

"Monte, as you call him, ought to be able to take care of himself. If he can't I wouldn't think your guardianship would make his chances much better."

"I'm little but I'm good. Ain't I, oh, my! Ef you're dead sure you kin manidge Hold Up Charley ef he comes this way I ain't sure I better not go try find Monte, anyhow. He warn't in no condish' fur snap shootin', an' suthin' tells me in me bones thet he needs me."

Ethel had said little to the boy, and nothing at all in regard to the Monte concerning whom her father had questioned him. She was listening keenly, though; and as Harry started up she endeavored to induce him to remain.

It was no use, though.

He was much obliged to them for their hospitality, but it seemed to him that he was needed more at another place. After the *fiasco* of the morning Clark Bruce would be apt to defer any attack there—if one was intended—until Angus should have time to get somewhat on his guard.

So it appeared to him, and he gathered himself up, feeling of his pistols with a flourish that might be pardoned in a youngster of his size and attainments.

"Ef I hedn't bin so dead tired I'd 'a' bin on ther trail afore this, but even a boy kin grow weary, an' last night I hed no slouch ov a time ef I say it meself."

The more he had discussed the matter the more positive Harry grew about going. He knew the short cut to the Break of Day, and intended to take it. He could hear the latest news of Monte there, even if he did not find the sport.

As he skurried along he almost laughed at his own anxiety, but for all that never wavered in his purpose.

"Wouldn't be a half bad plan ter look in on Clarky ez I go along," he thought to himself.

"Don't want much ter put me head in the mouth ov ther lion, but it wouldn't hurt ter know ef he's at home. They hed a move on foot fur Thursday but it might be ez it's bin shoved along on ther schedule. Wisht I knowed jest what it war. I could tell better when they'd be apt ter try ther rifle."

He did not intend to spend much time over the effort, and it would not take him a hundred yards out of his way. When he was passing the spot where Clark Bruce's shaft had been sunk he turned aside in that direction and approached it carefully.

It was not hard to reach the place under cover, and before he had gone far he learned the caution he had used was not wasted.

He heard the same whistle that had been used by the road-agents the night before; and then, some one came out of the shaft, and spoke in guarded tones.

Harry dropped instantly to the ground, but at once began to crawl forward. He was afraid he was too far off to hear the conversation he would not miss for anything.

But the answer came in tones loud enough to reach his opened ears:

"Ther boss says he's good an' ready, now, an' he's goin' ter finish his work ter-night er never. You better do yourn."

Then, he lay still and listened to the revelation which followed.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLAST AT THE BREAK OF DAY.

MONTÉ SAUL was nodding in spite of himself, though he held a pistol in his hand, and faced the shaft which led down from the upper world.

As yet, his mine was not a very big hole in the ground, but enough work had been done to show what might be expected, and there was not a man in the district who

would not have fought for the property tooth and nail, had he once been put in possession. The only wonder was that Monte had not raised money on his expectations, and pushed faster the work of development.

It was very lonesome down there, and somewhat cool and damp. Under other circumstances the sport might have found it hard work to get to sleep, but he had not altogether recovered from the different ways death had come against him, and rest was what he needed.

He was settling himself into what would have been a dreamless sleep when a boy came sliding down a rope, and dropped lightly to the floor of the mine.

"It's Monte, sure enough," he thought, as his quick eye caught sight of the sleeping man.

"Seems ter be waitin' ter shoot some 'un, an' ef I don't wake him keerful like he may kill me. Say, Pard Monte, wake up! Hyer's news by ther bucket, an' Harry Carter's a bringin' ov it."

He dropped at full length when he had spoken, and the one candle threw no light on his reclining figure, while Monte, wide awake, sprung to his feet, exclaiming:

"Is that you, my boy? They have left me here alone, like a bait in a bear-trap, and it's no safe place for you, but I'm glad to see you, all the same. I've a message to send, and you can carry it better than another."

"Message nothin'. Thar ain't no time fur messages. Clarky bought yer men out, an' that's why ye'r hyer alone, not countin' a boy ov my figger an' dimenshuns. He's comin' right in on yer, him an' his pards, an' when he gits through with his job you won't never be heard ov no more."

"Let him come. There will hardly be enough of them to fill that shaft, and I can stand the corpses till morning."

Monte was becoming something like his old self, and the prospect of a fight with his enemy did not give him as much uneasiness as the boy thought it should.

"Oh, you don't sabbe. He's goin' ter bu'st in on yer somewhar along ther level, an' ef yer don't know whar, four ter one'll make long odds when you Kerry ther lamp."

"Ah, I know the spot!" exclaimed Monte, with a start. "It must be so. If they give me five minutes yet they will never come out of the mine by that track."

"Then, it's blamed doubtful ef they git out ter-night by ary other. When they drewed ther heads inter ther shell I jest give 'em time ter git settled an' then cut ther rope. It would take blamed good climbin' fur a monkey ter rise out ov that shaft, an' Clark Bruce ain't no monkey."

"Good boy! We have them," said Monte, and he led the way back into the drift.

He knew almost as much about the ground in both mines as Clark Bruce did; and if that worthy had been running a shaft to tap the Break of Day he believed he knew its exact location. There was a certain rift in the rock which offered a natural course, though it was only a crevice at the point where it ran into his drift.

"If they haven't broken in already I'll swear to it they won't come through this night, unless they can carry more stone than I think their backs are able."

Monte carried several cartridges of nitroglycerine, and he was certain he knew where to place them to do the most good.

The boy watched him with interest, holding the light above his head and ready for instant retreat. He hoped in his soul Clark Bruce and his gang were about to be buried beyond hope of resurrection, and it was a disappointment when he heard the voice of Monte, calling into the crevice:

"Back, you hounds, if you are there. You have iust thirty seconds' lease of life."

Then he and the boy fled away.

They had not far to go until they had

reached a point of safety, and at the moment of halting they heard a horrible roar and crash, and the earth around them appeared to be shaken to its foundations, while the passage grew full of the peculiar nitrous odor.

Their light went out from the concussion of the air, but for that they did not care. It was soon relit, and they went back to the place where Monte had fired his blast.

If looks went for anything, Clark Bruce might be half a mile off. The explosion had shaken off a thin shell which had masked a small tunnel, but that tunnel was full to the top with broken stone and dirt, and Monte felt sure it was choked up for yards, if not to the further end.

"If, as you say, you dropped ther rope into the shaft, they will be apt to stay there till some one lets them out; and I'll hardly be in much hurry about doing it."

"Now then, you have some other news. What is it? Was Angus Ames all right when you left him?"

"Right side up, but I won't swear how he is now, though fellers like him is hard fighters when they gits ter goin', an' most likely he's a jaybird."

"What do you mean? Was not Bruce in there, after all?"

"He's thar, right ernough. Hold Up Charley hez ther other end ov ther contract. Fact are, he hez two ends, an' Bruce are somewhar about ther middle. What I'm dyin' ter know is, which end he's goin' ter take up fu'st, er ef he's goin' ter work 'em both tergether."

"Never mind that. Angus Ames comes first of all. You can tell me the particulars as we go along."

"It's quick told," was Harry's answer.

"They're goin' ter raid ther town and scoop Ames up, all in ther same moshun. Ef you thinks one man an' a boy kin stop 'em—sail in."

"But where will they begin?"

"You tell; I can't."

"At the town most likely, yet, who knows? And it must be almost time for them to begin their work."

"Jest about, fur they wanted ter hev a fair start afore mornin'."

"The town, then, for choice. I will go there and put the men I can rely on on their guard. You hurry to Ames and tell him to be on his guard. Diamond Dave and his friends are coming to Dead Latch to-night, and if they are in time I can use them. Half a dozen men will be out at the cottage as soon as possible after I can give the word. Now, off with you."

This was not exactly what Harry had bargained for, but there was no disputing Monte when he used that tone. He did not linger; and Monte went away in a direction nearly at right angles.

It only took a moment or so for them to get out of sight of each other, and then the boy halted.

"Looks ez though there might be a considerable ov a muss ter-night, an' no tellin' who'll git wiped out," he muttered.

"Don't seem jest right ter leave them villains cooped up ter starve—pervidin' that blast didn't blow ther livers out, ez it ort ter. An' then, ef they should git out, an' j'ine in the mix, they might git wiped out long with ther rest, which would save a heap ov trouble in ther herecomeafter. I'll give 'em a show fur ther white aliey, an' ef ther rope ain't long ernough they kin blame themselves an' not me."

He slid quietly over to the windlass and listened.

Not a sound was there from below, but that went for nothing. They might not yet have recovered from their surprise. There was still quite a coil of rope on the windlass, and this Harry rapidly unrolled and let down. If it reached the bottom the caged rascals would have a way of escape, and he

hardly thought they would improve the opportunity to attack the Break of Day.

Then, he hurried on in the direction of the cottage.

A number of hours had elapsed since he set out to search for Monte and in that time much evil might have been worked. He hardly knew what he expected to find as he crossed the ford and made his way toward the house.

So far, he heard no suspicious sounds, and all was dark when he came near the building. He began to think he was in time, and to wonder how he could best arouse Angus Ames without making too much outcry. He came up silently, and there was John, seated on the steps, fast asleep, with his double-barreled shot-gun over his arm.

The moonlight shone directly in his face, and he made no very charming picture, for his back was humped up against the wall, his chin was hanging down, his mouth was wide open, and he was snoring like a steam calliope with the nightmare.

Harry had a spice of mischief in him, that would show itself at times no matter what the risk.

The man had to be wakened up before anything could be done toward cautioning the inmates, and the boy took his own way doing it. He picked up a small pebble, and cast it into the open mouth, at the same time crouching quickly down at the edge of the porch.

John awoke with a yell, and without waiting to see what was the matter raised his gun and fired both barrels in the air. Then he executed a rapid retreat into the house, slamming the door behind him as a window opened, and the voice of Angus Ames was heard, exclaiming:

"What is it, John? Who is there?"

"It's all right, Mister Ames, it's jest me. I found Monte, an' he sent me back ter tell yer ther news. Git a hus'sel on an' let me in, fur I reckon thar ain't much time ter cut ter waste."

Ames recognized the voice in a moment, and did not delay. Before John had recovered his wits the door was open and Harry was in.

He came quickly too, and pushed the door shut behind him.

"What is it?" asked Ames, as the boy stood silent, and in an attitude of listening.

"Ef I hold on a minnit I reckon I kin save my breath. Hold Up Charley an' his gang are a-comin' ter make a scoop, an' frum what I heard along ther trail frum ther ford I should jedge they war almost hyer now."

"They would never dare attack the house!" exclaimed Ames, only half convinced the lad was in earnest.

"Dare nothin'. Takin' in you an' Miss Ethel ain't common amusement fur sich ez him. Why, they're goin' ter raid ther town!"

The window was still open, and through it came the sound of clattering hoofs, while from behind them rose a little cry of alarm. Ethel had come gliding out from the other room and heard the news.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RAID OF THE NIGHT RIDERS.

THE cottage of Angus Ames was well calculated for defense, yet for a moment its owner trembled.

He had the courage of a lion when once actually face to face with danger, but he was not a fighter from the love of it, and his experience in such matters was hardly equal to the boy's. He was uncertain how far it would be safe to rely on the others for aid in his defense, and he knew he could not be on all four sides of the house at once.

And if rumor had not belied him, Hold Up Charley was a terrible fellow for just such affairs as this promised to be. He had captured two or three rich men in his time, to

hold for ransom; and held them, too, until the sum demanded had reached his treasury.

Ames had hardly thought himself of sufficient importance to induce such a raid, but if it came he knew it had to be fought to the bitter end.

"Steady, there, John," was his stern order.

"If you are going to run at all, run now. If you are going to stay by me, load your gun and obey orders. We will give them a hotter reception than they dream of if they are really coming."

"An' what yer s'pose I'll be doin'?" chipped in Harry. "You better plug it to 'em at long range, an' John when they gits moderate near; but when they get close enough fur my droppers ter reach 'em they'll begin ter talk."

Then Ethel spoke up.

"And I have not been handling fire-arms the last six months for nothing. It is a terrible thing to do, but they bring it on themselves. We will beat them off if it costs a dozen lives."

"That's ther way ter talk it. An' ef we kin hold 'em level fur a bit I s'pect we'll hev help. Monte started out on ther war-path, an' he won't leave ther trail till he hez 'em all a-runnin'. Lay out ther work, Mister Ames, an' we'll git riddy fur ther doin' ov it."

"Ethel will keep out of it until the last minute, and then take charge of the window to the rear."

Ames was deadly cool, and spoke deliberately, though the clatter sounded not far away.

"We three will watch in front, and do what damage we can until they divide. Then, John will take the north side, and you, Harry, the south, until we can see at what point the most serious attack is to be made. I will hail them first, and shoot soon after."

"An' recomember thet shootin' at night ain't jest a sure thing onless ye'r' used to it. Blow yer horn!"

The crowd was in sight, and coming on with unslackened pace. Angus Ames waited no longer but called out sharply:

"Halt! Who goes there? Speak quickly or we let drive."

"Hold Up Charley and his whole gang. We know you have a little sack in the cellar, and this time we mean to make clean work. Step out of there, all of you, with your hands up. If you don't come in sixty seconds by the watch we blow up the house, and cut the throat of every creature we find left living."

The captain spoke as though he meant it, and though the party pulled up somewhat at the challenge, which had been unexpected, they came on at a slackened speed.

"That for your answer!" shouted Ames, and he pulled trigger as he spoke, while John let fly with one barrel of his shot-gun.

Like an echo came a dozen shots, and had not the three dodged at the first flash some one would most likely have been hurt. More than one ball came tearing in through the window.

"Swing low, and forward, boys!" shouted the leader. "There is no time for nonsense, now, and the fools must take their chances."

Every man swung head downward, Indian fashion, along the side of his horse, and the charge swirled on, while, from a window in the rear arose a jingle of breaking glass, followed by a cry from Ethel.

Some one had arisen at the side of the house, and threw something with a burning fuse attached through the window.

The girl flung herself headlong from the room, while the thing lay hissing on the floor, and as she sprung to the side of her father there was a terrible explosion, which rocked and tore and shattered, until the cottage seemed ready to collapse, while under its cover the outlaws, leaping from their horses, swarmed against the house.

The explosion unnerved Ames, who sprung to meet his daughter. John tumbled headlong out of the window, and lay with his heels up in the air, while Harry Carter suddenly stretched himself at full length on the floor and rolled under a table. He had seen a blast fired once before that evening and knew what the result was like.

The ruse had been only too successful. That moment of indecision ruined everything. Through the broken window, and the drifting smoke, came half a dozen of the outlaws, who hurled themselves upon Angus Ames, and bore him to the floor.

Three prisoners they made in a twinkling, and then the house was over-run. Hold Up Charley had sure knowledge of a certain bag of coin, which he intended to have. Fortunately he knew nothing of the presence of the boy or he would have had him first of all.

The coin could scarcely have been said to be hidden, since it was in a plain chest of iron, and a glad shout arose as a key from the pocket of Ames was found to fit the lock.

"Victory, beauty, and plunder!" laughed the outlaw captain.

"Attend to the prisoners according to orders. Then, bring up the horses and be off. Save the young woman, anyway, but if the old fool makes any trouble, choke him. We ought to do it anyhow, but this ain't the place for it, and we'll give him a show, first."

"Bedad, an' av ye don't do it hyer Oi'm doubtin' av yez do it ilsewhere," put in Jimmy O'Brien, poking his head through the window.

"It's a hornets' nest ye sthirred up in town, an' it's coming phor yez they are, in good earnest."

There was no looking for further booty, and Harry Carter continued to be overlooked. The men trooped out, taking two prisoners with them, and were soon in saddle, leaving John bound hand and foot, lying helpless in the shadow of the house.

"They are coming in good earnest," said Hold Up, looking hesitatingly in the direction of the river.

"I would stay here and fight them, but they might get more help from the town before the thing was over. We'll give them a chance later on. Off and away!"

He sprung into his saddle, but the momentary hesitation had its price. The men put spurs to their horses and were in the act of dashing away when some one, they knew not who, fired two shots with a revolver.

And with peculiar wisdom he aimed, not at the men, but, at the horses on which the two prisoners had been placed.

The shots went where they were meant to go, and one animal went down, while the other wheeled, gave an awful plunge, and went galloping madly toward the ford, Ethel Ames clinging to his back.

"Stop her! After her!" shouted the captain, setting the example, and fully half the gang of road-agents went tearing down the trail.

If Hold Up Charley had taken an instant for thought he would have hesitated about giving that order, or else seen that his whole force went with him.

There was just one boy in their rear, and when he had fired those shots he fell back with a silent speed that took him out of the range of their sight before the men who remained behind located the spot from which his bullets had come. They fired two or three times in the direction where the skulker was supposed to be, and then made a charge, which found nothing.

Angus Ames came down on his feet when the horse fell, but unfortunately had no chance for escape. One of the men immediately covered him with his revolver, and ordered him with an oath to stand still; but

that took one more from the fighting-force which found more than they bargained for between them and the ford.

The force they met was small, but every man in it was a fighter. Diamond Dave had come over from Honey Dew, with a few of his friends to help till the trouble with Clark Bruce was over. They were on horseback, and were going direct to the Break of Day when Monte met them.

Dave told something of a band of men they had seen at a little distance, and when he had mentioned the direction in which they were going, Saul did not hesitate. He took one of the horses, and sent its rider on foot to warn the men of Dead Latch. Then he led the way to the river, and recognized Ethel as she came tearing down toward the ford.

The little party opened out to allow her to pass through, and then put spurs to their horses, though Hold Up Charley and the men who followed him were but a rod or two away. They knew that in a charge the chances were with the hardest riders, provided the shooting was equal.

They did not see that several men on foot had crossed the ford just behind them, or that one of them sprung at the head of the horse which was carrying Ethel Ames.

It was a bold thing to do, but Clark Bruce had courage enough of his own wicked kind, and though for a little he was swung clear of the ground, and carried on by the frightened animal, yet at last he threw the horse back upon its haunches, and held it in its tracks with a grip of iron.

Hold Up Charley was a straight shot with the pistol, and up to all the dodges and wiles of frontier fighting, but he met men who were his equal, and who knew they were battling for a righteous cause.

As the two forces came together, every man disappeared from sight, swinging behind his horse, and firing from under its neck if he fired at all.

But Diamond Dave and Monte fired first, and their bullets bit sharply, while they remained unhurt. Before they could check the rush of their steeds, outlaws and avengers had passed each other, and then there followed the sound of a single shot.

Ethel had recognized Clark Bruce in her would-be rescuer, and when he held out his arm to seize her as she slid from her horse, she darted away. And just then there was the sound of a pistol-shot, and Clark Bruce went down in a huddled heap, while Hold Up Charley, not knowing who it was he had struck, wheeled his horse again, to face the men who were closing in on him.

His ears had been open to the sounds of shooting near the cottage, and now the noise there began again. He could see that only one-half of his men were with him, and from the way these new-comers went to work, he knew they would be hard to whip, and no coin in pocket when the fray was over. He gave a rallying shout, fired two or three shots, and then with half of his men behind him, was riding away like mad, closely pursued by Monte and his friends.

The outlaws turned in their saddles to return the shots from behind, but they were in full retreat, and as they passed the cottage the men there joined them. Two or three had been hit by an unseen marksman, who fired and fell back, and it began to look as though for once a panic had seized the road-agents.

Monte had a graze, Diamond Dave a slight wound, and the others, on their side, were more or less damaged, but no one was seriously harmed. When they had cleared the road in front of the cottage Angus Ames ran down to seek his daughter, and Monte Saul followed him.

They found her bending over Clark Bruce, but that man was too far gone to tell the meaning of his plots and schemes.

Seeing Ethel once more safe in her father's arms Monte would have turned away, but

she saw him, recognized him, and called him by name.

"Who are you?" she asked, as he came toward her, a strange look of hesitation on her face.

"That locket you carry by a ribbon around your neck! How does it come to be in your possession?"

"It is the portrait of my mother," was the ready answer. "She placed it there with her own hands, and there it will stay as long as I have life. After that, who knows? It may come to you."

"And your mother was my mother, and you are my brother, lost to us all for so many years. Forgive him, father! The world has not been wide enough to keep us apart, and now that we are together it would break my heart to lose him again."

"I have little to forgive," answered Ames, calmly.

"I doubt, too, if he has much to pardon. He left his home of his own accord, though not, perhaps, without provocation. When he wants to return it is open for him to do so. He has at last been trying to redeem himself, and I have had an eye on him since I discovered he was near us. The Break of Day will prove a little bonanza, I firmly believe, and as I have bought, and will give him, the only opposing title to the mine, he will enjoy it undisturbed."

"And Clark Bruce. Who was he?" asked Monte, glancing at the fallen man, with a pitying curiosity.

"My unworthy nephew, and after you and Ethel, the only heir I have living. He would have stopped at nothing to obtain the wealth that has lately come to us, though he thought he wished to spare Ethel. Glad am I that he came to his end at the hands of one of his tools, and not by yours. It was a mistake, of course, but Hold Up Charley has done you a service, though one you scarce dare express your thanks for."

"Ain't I got no relatives nowhar, er did I jest growed, like ther darky gal in ther play? This sorter work are fun amazin' fur awhile, but in ther end I reckon it'd be apt ter make me tired."

Angus Ames placed a hand on the head of the boy as he answered;

"You have found a father, a brother and a sister, my lad, if it is only by adoption. A boy with your skill and courage certainly must have some sterling merit behind his rough exterior, and ours shall be the task to bring it to light."

After that, the dead and wounded were cared for, explanations were made to the men who came out from Dead Latch, and a little family reunion, which included Harry Carter, was held at the cottage, and it lasted till the sun came up over the mountains.

"An' ef I hedn't let that rope down inter ther shaft Clark Bruce wouldn't 'a' bin on hand fur ther shootin', an' all this circus would 'a' had ter bin done over ag'in."

So chuckled the boy to Monte—who was henceforth known as Parker Ames—and with that the last mystery was explained.

THE END.

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